

CHOICE

Tests to make
cooking a pleasure:

10 gas **cooktops**
20 **saucepans**

Supermarket shopping:

The smart shopper's defence kit

How to tell if
'organic' food
really is

Ethical investment:

Make money with a clearer conscience

MORE TESTS: Digital mobile phones • Video recording

you'll love it

Write to us at CHOICE, 23 Carrington Road, Marrickville NSW

simson

Some choice abuse



Jane Mackenzie

A few CHOICE subscribers contacted us recently to complain about phone calls from a company calling itself 'Choice Marketing Services', which wanted to ask them a few market research questions.

When they said they were unwilling or unable to do this, they were subjected to rudeness and bad language.

First, of course, we want to assure you that this company has no relationship with CHOICE whatsoever. We can't say whether the name is the same by coincidence or because the company wanted people to make the connection between it and this magazine, but we can assure you that any phone research CHOICE conducts would be staffed by professionally trained researchers who would respect anyone's right not to answer their questions. They would never be rude or abusive.

CHOICE researchers will also always tell you their name and that they're ringing from CHOICE. If you'd like to check that they're genuinely from the magazine, ask them to tell you your subscriber number. If you're still concerned, please phone our switchboard on (02) 9577 3333 between 8.30 am and 5.30 pm to check.

Your feedback on CHOICE and on products and services you've used as a consumer is very valuable to us, and to other subscribers. So you can be certain that any contact we have with you will be conducted with courtesy.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

Your letters

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow your letter up. We're sorry we can't personally answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.

Write to us at CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.
Phone us on (02) 9577 3399.

Fax us on (02) 9577 3355.

email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au

World Wide Web address: www.sofcom.com.au/ACA/

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Cover photo: Kent Mears

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Food shopping is changing radically, and it's being driven aggressively by the big retailers. While they still want you to buy, and buy lots more, they're also trying to appeal to your 'lifestyle choices'.

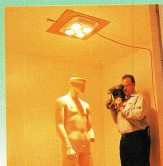


◀ The supermarkets have classified four different types of shopper — which one are you? See page 7.

Coming in the next three issues:

Tests: Multidisc CD players, 500 L fridges, day backpacks, fish, 51 cm TVs, bathroom heat lamps, laundry detergents, answering machines, woks, electric blankets, cheese.

◀ Testing (did you guess?) bathroom heat lamps.



◀ All mobile phones aren't equal — our test uncovers the good ones. See page 24.

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Don't take just any old digital mobile phone offered with a call plan — find out from our test which models are better in weak-signal areas, which have the latest features, and more.

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We looked at the shallow end of the price range — and here's what we found: for \$350 to \$400, you don't miss out on much.

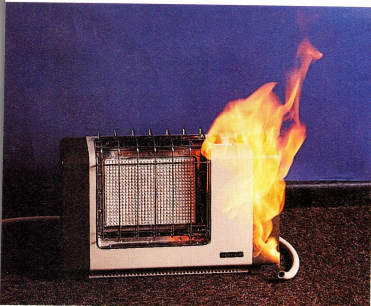
▶ Now you can get a remote control for your VCR that lights up for use in a dark room. And there are lots more features on the latest models. See page 43.



Reports: The cost of vision care, how satisfied are you with your bank?, electronic banking, product certification schemes, lemon laws, food labelling, shopping guide to paper products, great financial disasters of our time, TV infomercials and advertorials, retirement villages, cash management trusts, caring for someone at home, convenience store vs supermarket prices.

We try to bring you tests and reports in the planned month, but sometimes have to move an article because of problems that occur during testing and research, or for lack of space in a particular issue. We apologise if this causes any inconvenience.

A CHOICE win in the defamation court



We set this photo up in our labs to show what can happen to the hose on the affected Mod-n-Aire MS12 heaters. When we published the article, the manufacturer sued for defamation. After a lengthy court battle, CHOICE won.

these all seemed reluctant to take action to warn consumers.

In fact, while the manufacturer had fixed the problem for future stock and for consumers who complained, it didn't instigate a recall and replacement program or even a warning for existing customers who had the MS12.

CHOICE published the article and the manufacturer sued for defamation.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU DISCOVER that an unsafe heater is in people's homes but no-one wants to tell them about it? If you're CHOICE, you make sure consumers find out — even if you end up having to defend yourself in a defamation action over it.

The Australian Consumers' Association, publisher of CHOICE, has emerged victorious from a lengthy legal battle with Bowin Designs Pty Ltd, the manufacturer of a gas heater with a faulty hose connection, which was first exposed in this magazine (*From gas heater to flamethrower*, July 1992). In several cases the gas hose separated from the heater and gas was ignited; the effect was described by witnesses as like having a flamethrower in the room.

This is what consumers had to say about the MOD-N-AIRE MS12 portable gas heater:

■ "Flame came from the end of the hose — it was a good foot in length ... the whole floor was blackened."

■ "I quickly held the hose against the skirting board to snuff the flame ... it was lucky the heater was sitting on a bare timber floor rather than on carpet."

When CHOICE first began investigating the heater, laboratory project manager Des Shales and journalist Peter Cerehxe took CHOICE's concerns to the Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs (the government body in charge of recalls and safety), the Australian Gas Association (AGA — the industry association and regulator of gas appliances), AGL (the gas utility in Sydney) and the manufacturer. Before the article appeared,

preparation, CHOICE's research and procedures were put under intense scrutiny in a case lasting more than three weeks before the Federal Court of Australia. In the end we won the case, with costs. In his judgment, His Honour Justice Lindgren commented:

"In sum, [the Consumers' Association] was correct in its assumption that there were in use in consumers' homes a substantial number of heaters which posed a fire danger; knew that no-one else had taken steps to warn owners of suspect heaters or was proposing to do so; knew that the identity and addresses of the owners of MS12 heaters were unknown, so that the only effective means of communication with them was by means of a general and widely publicised warning; knew that it had the means available of giving such a warning through its magazine CHOICE; and knew that its *raison d'être* included the protection of consumers against the risk of injury from dangerous products."

Following the decision of the Federal Court, Bowin Designs launched an appeal. However, shortly before the matter was to return to court, it withdrew the appeal.

■ **How to tell if you've got a MOD-N-AIRE MS12 heater with a faulty hose connection:** First look for your heater's approval sticker or label (usually on the back). It should state the model name and manufacturer's name. If your heater is an MS12, check the serial number. If it's between 2756 and 5670, the hose connection may be faulty. Have it checked and fixed if necessary before you use it again.

Can you help?

Have you been ripped off?

We're researching an article on financial disasters and would like to talk to people who have lost money in major calamities, such as Estate Mortgage or Pyramid Building Society.

If you'd like to share your experience, please write to **Financial disasters**, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204 or email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au

Thank you for your help.

Have you been hurt by your medical care?

Have you or any of your loved ones been hurt in any way as a result of a medical treatment? Have you ever had an operation go wrong? Have you taken medication which caused serious side effects? Has a 'routine' test led to a major complication?

If so, you might like to contact Ray Moynihan at the ABC TV Science & Talks department in Sydney.

He is currently researching a book and a possible ABC TV documentary about plans to improve the quality of healthcare treatments. As part of that research, he would like to talk to people who have had health problems as a result of their medical care. The discussions will be strictly confidential.

Call or write to Ray Moynihan at:

- **Phone:** (02) 9950 4035.
- **Letter:** ABC TV Science & Talks, GPO Box 9994, Sydney 2001.
- **email:** quantum@your.abc.net.au

Sunglasses

ONE OF OUR SUBSCRIBERS, LINDA Johnson of WA, came across these 'Kiddie Sunglasses' (below) in a supermarket. They don't offer any UV protection, and because they're marketed as a toy they don't have to — they're exempt from the standard.

But will your child appreciate the difference? It's all very well to say they're a toy — presumably, but not stated, to be played with only indoors — but there's nothing to stop a child wearing them outside. In this case they could be worse than wearing no sunglasses at all. The dark lenses reduce visible light and cause the pupils to dilate, letting in more harmful UV rays, which are not reduced by the tint.

If you buy sunglasses for a child, make sure they're the real McCoy. Check labelling and tags to ensure the glasses comply with Australian Standard AS1067.1-1990, or are at least labelled '100% UV protection'.



How would a child know not to wear these 'toy' sunglasses outside?

More FID facts

WE'RE STILL CONCERNED about the number of readers who are being charged financial institutions duty (FID) when they shouldn't be. This is despite our earlier alerts in March and September 1997 CHOICE.

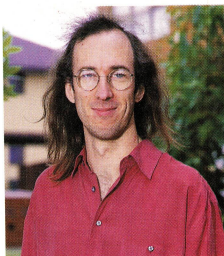
FID works out at six cents for each \$100 deposited and is charged on practically all deposits into all accounts except in Queensland. However, if you receive a direct deposit from the DSS or Veterans' Affairs, the payment should be exempt.

There's obviously a great deal of confusion about the exemptions. Craig Macbride from Victoria was told by his cash management trust that, "They have no way to automatically tell when DSS payments come to someone's account." And they were "unsure of whether the rules applied to them".

This response isn't unusual. We contacted 26 banks, building societies and credit unions around the country and asked them about the exemptions.

Disturbingly, we found that 14 said there were no exemptions, had never heard of them, or didn't know how they worked.

This lack of knowledge about FID could create quite a windfall for state governments (except in Queensland). If FID was incorrectly collected on even half of the exempted pensions and allowances, state governments would in effect be levying around \$9.6 million in additional indirect tax during 1997/98.



Craig Macbride's cash management trust told him they weren't sure whether the FID exemption rules applied to him.

We can't estimate the amount of FID incorrectly collected. Many of the state treasuries have told us they will discuss the issue of exemptions with financial institutions. But clearly, banks, credit unions, building societies and state treasuries are failing to address this problem. So here are the FID facts.

■ In the ACT, NSW, NT, SA, Victoria and WA, direct payments under the *Social Security Act 1991* and *Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986* are exempt. You will still pay FID on all other deposits.

■ In Tasmania, you're entitled to an exemption from FID and the more expensive debits tax on all transactions if you present your healthcare or pensioner concession card to your financial institution. Unfortunately, if you're not eligible for one of these concession cards, you have to pay FID.

What can you do?

If you're being charged FID incorrectly, ask for a refund. If that doesn't work, try contacting the treasury office in your state or the appropriate dispute resolution scheme. Bank customers can complain to the Banking Ombudsman, while credit union members should talk to the Credit Union Dispute Reference Centre.

Unfortunately for building society customers, there is no dispute resolution scheme covering this issue, so your state's treasury office is your only option.

■ To contact the Banking Ombudsman, call 1800 337 444, or (03) 9613 7333 in Melbourne.

■ You can call the Credit Union Dispute Reference Centre on 1800 624 241.

Correction

Playing your cards right

CHOICE, November 1997

Confusion among front-line bank staff over when interest begins to accrue on credit card debt means that customers may be getting the wrong information.

When CHOICE contacted banks' customer service departments for our credit card story in November, three of the institutions gave us wrong information.

■ We said on page 15 that the **COMMONWEALTH BANK**'s cards with an interest-free period started charging interest from the purchase date. This should have read from the **statement date**.

■ We said **BANKWEST** cards with an interest-free period started charging interest from the due date. This should have read **purchase date**.

■ The **CITIBANK** information was printed as statement date. This should have read **purchase date**.

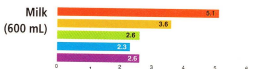
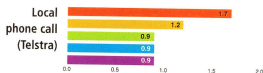
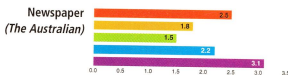
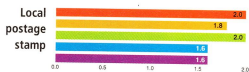


Fruits of your labor

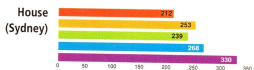
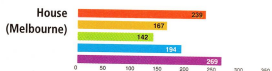
It took a bit longer to earn enough to buy most things 25 to 35 years ago than it does now — although for big items like a house or a car, the earning times now are back up with (or above) those for 1962.

1962
1972
1982
1992
1997

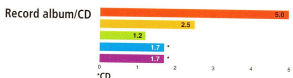
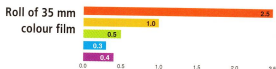
Minutes to earn



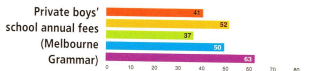
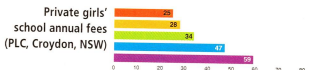
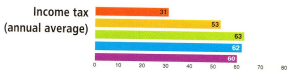
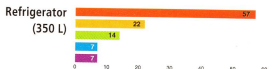
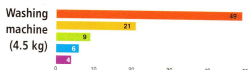
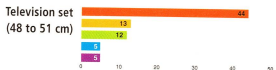
Weeks to earn



Hours to earn



Days to earn



We based our calculations on a man's average gross weekly wage for a 40-hour week at ordinary time (women earn, on average, less than men), as supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

REPORT

Supermarkets are undergoing radical change as we enter the twenty-first century. CHOICE reports on the food retail emperors' new clothes. They're sophisticated, but they cloak the same old naked ambition — to get you to buy as much as possible.

How supermarkets sell to you

SINCE CHOICE LAST REPORTED ON this issue in 1990, the supermarkets have been learning to play a whole new ball game. Generally shoppers have become increasingly 'time-poor'; fewer people cook from scratch, and we're eating more meals than ever outside the home. Now when we shop for food, we place a premium (and often pay one too) on convenience.

Shoppers are no longer a captive mass market who all stock up on a regular day of the week: there is diversity and segmentation. The Australian market used to be thought too small for this to happen, but now shoppers vary considerably in what they seek from a supermarket, their attitudes to grocery shopping and their shopping behaviour.

Your age, ethnic background, household composition, income and so on all determine what you buy and how you shop — and hence are of intense interest to the retailers. The advent of scanning, and more recently loyalty programs like Coles Myer's Fly Buys, is enabling them to find out as much as possible about their customer mix at each location. The trick then becomes to appeal to as many segments

of that customer mix as possible within the one store.

A recent study, entitled *The Australian Supermarket Shopper — Attitudes and Behaviour 1996–1997* and published by the Australian Supermarket Institute, profiles four distinct groups:

- Supermarket lovers (about one in three shoppers).
- Price-conscious shoppers.
- Elitists.
- Ready-to-eaters (the last three make up about one-fifth of the market each).

We've developed a quiz based on this study — see *What type of supermarket shopper are you?* on page 10 — to help you work out which category best fits your shopping habits and therefore which sales tactics you're most likely to be vulnerable to. Whichever one you fall into, our *Shopper's defence kit* on page 11 has some tips for you.

Changes in the supermarket

Time was when bricks and mortar in a convenient location made a successful supermarket, and its only mission was 'getting the consumer to the food'. Now, the task is 'getting the food to the consumer' — in whatever combination of methods and styles he or she wants, and at whatever hours.

Accordingly, the three retailers who reign over an extraordinary 75.8% of the Australian market — Woolworths (34.3% market share in 1996), Coles (26.3%) and Franklins (15.2%) — are all busily

IN BRIEF

- Supermarkets no longer see shoppers as a captive mass market — now they're marketing hard at different types of shopper (see pages 7 to 9), even down to the level of different store designs for different locations.
- Find out what kind of shopper you are (page 10) and how to counter the sales tactics (page 11).

Above: Franklins now wants to capture the 'smart shopper' as well as the 'battler'. So we'll be seeing more Big Fresh and Franklins Fresh stores and fewer No Frills.



re-inventing themselves (Woolworths trades as Purity in Tasmania and Safeway in Victoria).

In this article CHOICE has focused on these three major national retailers. Many strategies are common to all three.

Growth in fresh

In a visionary move as far back as 1987, Woolworths launched its 'Fresh Food People' campaign and introduced fresh products (fruit and vegetables, meat, poultry, seafood, baked goods and a service deli) into its stores. Since then Coles and Franklins have hastened to 'freshen' their stores.

Meal solutions

Consumers' growing preference for eating away from home has taken a big bite out of the food retail business. The retailers are now going into direct competition with restaurants, take-away shops and caterers with 'meal solutions' — fresh, chilled dishes to eat cold or reheat.

Entry costs into this market are high, as it requires strict refrigeration, temperature control and so on for safety, as well as establishing new suppliers (Coles, for example, has sourced some of its fresh chilled meals from Qantas). But it's a strategy which the supermarkets are convinced will secure them a much bigger 'share of the stomach'.

Malls without walls

The chains are enhancing their 'one-stop shopping' appeal. Woolworths is adding petrol stations to as many of its car parks as possible. Ian Cornell, Chief General Manager, Woolworths Supermarkets, is confident the company can "match the lowest operator and give a rebate to people who shop with us". Service station owners fear this will be the end of their industry.

Woolworths Metro (this is the Sydney city-centre store) and Coles Express are aiming for the city-worker market: people who buy ready-to-eat food and want to be in and out fast.

Coles is putting banks into its stores. Alan Williams, Managing Director, Coles Supermarkets, says: "The trial of this is going very well — and we are also experimenting with Tatts Lotto and bill paying." Woolworths was also recently reported as considering a move into financial products such as deposit accounts and credit cards.

Both would dearly like to incorporate pharmacies, and in the bigger country-area stores they're expanding into general merchandise and clothing.

Other specialty services which could easily slide down the supermarkets' ever-open maw include coffee shops and take-away outlets (in-store eateries), post offices, creches, liquor stores and newsagencies. The retailers will bring more and more of life into the supermarket to try to get you to spend more of your time there (hence the push for further extension of trading hours).

Ironically, they are doing this by creating specialty areas within their stores which aim to reproduce the exact atmosphere of the small businesses they are eliminating.

Home shopping

To cater for those who never wish to set foot in the supermarket or are just too short of time, the retailers are set to venture into home shopping. You place your order on the Internet, and the goods either come to you at home or are ready for you to drive in and pick up on your way home.

The service will not come cheap, as it's labour-intensive for the supermarket: Ian Cornell of Woolworths reveals that on a \$100 order they will need to charge you an extra 11% to pick, pack and deliver.

Franklins may be in the strongest position here — it already prides itself on delivering the lowest costs, and its No Frills stores specialise in the staple dry groceries which home shopping is ideally placed to handle. This would explain why Greg Foran, its Marketing Director, is so positive: "In my view there are many people who will be prepared to pay the extra money for the convenience."

High-street stores

A new concept for the supermarkets is the smaller city-centre store which caters for a large volume of customers who only buy three or four items each (Woolworths Metro and Coles Express). The Sydney Express store, for example, is in the central business district, right by a major train and bus interchange. It's primarily tailored to capture trade from the commuter, city dweller and hungry office worker. So on its shelves are a large range of fresh and convenience foods; teas, coffees and cakes (there's always a birthday at the office); and dry groceries in easy-to-carry sizes and individual portions.





More of life coming into the supermarket: in-store eateries such as this café in a Coles store now compete with cafés and take-away shops outside the supermarket.

It also features a take-away food bar outside the store which changes its offerings four times a day. On Melbourne Cup Day, for example, the store was offering a range of prepared platters.

Maintaining some differences

Each of the big three chains is careful to preserve some uniqueness, because their offerings are becoming increasingly the same. From the consumer's point of view, Greg Foran of Franklins sums it up this way: "Franklins is the lowest cost of household shopping; Woolworths tries to answer all the needs of household shopping; and Coles is Mr Convenient — open 24 hours, the largest ranges, working on the fastest customer service."

Looking at it more from a business perspective, Franklins is restructuring and comprehensively reassessing every aspect of its dealings. Although low price will remain its strength, it's now also marketing value to capture 'the smart shopper', not just the 'battlers'. It's cutting down on No Frills stores and increasing its numbers of Big Fresh and Franklins Fresh.

Woolworths is refurbishing its stores, but also putting a lot of energy into new areas which are good matches with its core business — such as a wholesale arm to supply independents and an export business.

This outward focus may explain why Woolworths is criticised by a Coles executive as taking more of "a cookie cutter approach" to its supermarkets — limiting itself to several basic store models which are similar in design and layout, while it diversifies its operations elsewhere.

In contrast, Coles emphasises the extent to which it 'tweaks' variables such as the range of stock to suit the various customer mixes in each location — at the same time as it is introducing quite a different look into its new and refurbished stores.

Coles says it is intensely busy listening to customers, and that is what has driven, for example, its checkout remodelling (for faster service) and its new 'convenience layouts' (you can zip in and out for milk and bread at the front of the store, or skip whole aisles not of interest to you).

Continued overleaf

Some things never change

All the retailers swear blind they're just there to serve the customer, and are indignant about talk of sales tactics. "It's not manipulation, it's merchandising," says Ian Cornell of Woolworths. "I don't make any apologies for trying to sell stock to consumers; that's what we're here for — it's all fairly simple stuff, nothing sinister," says Alan Williams of Coles.

But the name of the game is still to get you to buy as much as possible in their stores. The new sophisticated, subtle ways of doing this are outlined on pages 7 to 9. Here's a quick glimpse into some of the enduring basic techniques:

■ **Store layout:** Some opt for leading you by the nose through the store (there's a choice of only one path, and it takes you through everything). Others pile on a glorious array of fresh foods at the entrance for maximum sensory stimulus, and hide the boring dry groceries. Some do both.

■ **Ambience:** This is one of the striking differences between the chains, as well as a key sales tactic. Supermarkets are striving to create atmosphere, in the whole store or parts of it, such as 'rural market/village square'; 'international food court'; 'upmarket boutiques'; 'family fun outing' and so on.

■ **Signage:** This is often the major decorative element in supermarket design, and it's not just there to show you where to find things. It's a 'communication system' that creates both a 'corporate brand' and a store image to suit the local community, as well as promoting the offerings within.

■ **Music:** Studies show that the tempo will influence how fast people shop. Supermarkets usually go for an even tempo without obtrusive volume, to encourage people to take their time or even linger.

■ **Lighting:** The growth of 'fresh' has led to much more use of lighting as a sales element — previously it was all just traditional ceiling fluorescents. Now lighting comes from all angles and makes the meat look red and juicy, the fruit shiny and colourful. It's also used to set a certain mood in the stores with 'boutiques'.

■ **Positioning on the shelf:** Eye level remains the prime position, even though one supermarket executive scoffs: "I am 6'3", and my wife is 4'10", so where is eye level?" The answer is, wherever it happens to fall for the prime buyer of that category of goods. For example, Arnott's Teddy Biscuits for children will be located at children's eye level.

■ **Impulse-buying incentives:** These include in-store demonstrations and samplings, 'endcap' displays (at the ends of the aisles) and other 'specials', goods at the checkouts and so on.

Impulse buying (anything bought on the spur of the moment) is usually up to a third of all purchases in the supermarket. It's not only those candy bars and magazines at the checkout, but also that interesting pre-prepared chicken korma or those yummy first mangoes of the season which weren't really on your shopping list, but...

'Value-added' fruit and vegetables — all chopped up and ready for you. You pay for the convenience, of course, but it's a great temptation for busy cooks.



What type of supermarket shopper are you?

The Australian Supermarket Institute (ASI) recently published the results of a study, *Supermarket shoppers: attitude and behaviour 1996-1997*. From the retailer's point of view, the study found four distinct types of supermarket shopper in Australia today. To find out which is closest to you, try this quiz, which we've based on the study's findings.

Read the four groups of statements below and decide which one best sums up your attitudes and behaviour. Then read on to see which category you fall into.

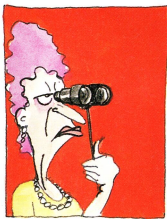
For some tips on how the supermarkets are targeting your type, and how to retain control of your shopping experience, check our *Shopper's defence kit*, on the right.



- A**
- I enjoy doing the grocery shopping.
 - I buy a wide range of products from the supermarket.
 - I would love to do more of my shopping in the supermarket.
 - I stock up on bargains in the supermarket when I see them.
 - I buy mostly what inspires me at the time.
 - The quality of fresh products (meat, fish, fruit and vegetables, baked goods) at the supermarket is high.
 - More specialty services should be set up within supermarkets (bank, post office, pharmacy, liquor, creche).



- B**
- I find grocery shopping a chore/stressful.
 - The fruit and vegetable shop offers fresher produce/better value than the supermarket.
 - The most important thing to me is price.
 - I like to shop at specialty stores for specific items (plants, stationery and so on).
 - I shop to a list and try to plan the week's meals in advance.
 - I keep my grocery budget down by buying some 'no-name' brands.
 - The butcher offers better quality/value than the meat available in the supermarket.
 - I usually do one big shop a week on a particular day.



- C**
- The most important thing to me is good-quality fresh produce.
 - I value having expert and friendly staff available.
 - I think ready-to-eat foods are unnecessary in supermarkets.
 - I buy food for only a few days at a time.
 - I avoid buying 'no-name' brands.
 - I like to buy raw ingredients and cook from scratch.
 - I don't make decisions based on price.
 - I prefer to use specialty stores for items such as fresh seafood, plants, stationery and so on.



- D**
- I often eat away from home or have take-away.
 - I would like to see coffee shops/restaurants/take-away outlets in supermarkets.
 - I like 'one-stop shopping' in one store.
 - I look for a good range of easy, ready-prepared foods.
 - I don't take particular notice of bargains or discounts.

According to the ASI study:

A. If most of the statements listed under A apply to you, you're a **Supermarket lover** (the largest category of grocery shopper at 35%). You use your supermarket for a wider range of products (particularly fresh) than the other types of shopper, and enjoy the experience more.

B. If most of the statements listed under B apply to you, you're a **Price-conscious shopper** (22% of grocery shoppers). You buy planned items at the best discount on a regular day of the week, and tend to find shopping a chore.

C. If most of the statements listed under C apply to you, you're an **Elitist** (22% of grocery shoppers). You search primarily for quality raw ingredients, shop frequently and cook most of your own food from scratch.

D. If most of the statements listed under D apply to you, you're a **Ready-to-eater** (21% of grocery shoppers). You like to have help with ready-prepared foods at the supermarket, as you don't often eat at home or cook.

If you find no single set of statements sums up your shopping style, you're probably a mixture of the four types. That's good news, in that you have something to gain from every tactic the supermarkets adopt!

Shopper's defence kit

One of the strongest demands from consumers today is for control over their own shopping experience. But isn't that irreconcilable with the retailers' bid to control it for you? Not necessarily.

As a first step, make sure you've done the *What type of shopper are you?* quiz on the left. Then check out this kit under the listing for your type, to see where you figure in the retailers' plans and the smart shopping tactics we suggest for you. We've also included some tips for all shoppers.

For all shoppers

- Make a shopping list — it will focus your mind on what you came for, even if you do like the shopping 'experience'.
- Never shop when you're hungry, and don't go shopping as an antidote to boredom or depression.
- Carry a calculator to make price comparisons easier.
- Learn the layout of the supermarket you use regularly, so that you don't have to walk through gazing at each shelf to find what you want.
- Look above and below your eye level — you may find a better deal.
- Don't let your small children's 'pester power' increase supermarket sales. If the kids are bored, search for ways to involve them in the shopping and make it a learning experience, such as selecting and counting fruit and vegetables. And lobby for in-store creches, parent-with-child easy-access parking and separate checkouts.
- Most importantly, make full use of your power as a customer. As Alan Williams, Managing Director of Coles Supermarkets, puts it, "Anything the customer wants is really the driving force — they stipulate what we carry, when we're open, and how we serve them."

CHOICE recommends letting your supermarket know, loud and clear, about any changes you want. Retailers are now much less listening in the past, but they insist they are now. This is the only reason why they're now trialling confectionery-free checkouts, for example. That's the best way to take control of your shopping experience.

For Supermarket lovers

The 'mall-without-walls' stores are being created with you in mind — where as many goods and services as possible are brought together under one roof (banks, pharmacies, newsagencies, florists, creches, liquor shops and so on). This gives some people greater convenience, but is also meant to encourage you to treat your supermarket shopping as a fun leisure activity the whole family can share. The retailers reason that the more time you spend with them, and the less it seems like a chore, the more you will spend — and they're right.

If you enjoy shopping like this but find it too expensive for your budget, try shopping with a list (even menu plans for the week, if you can stand it) to help you to focus on the things you need. You don't have to stock up on 'bargains' or try every new product. Allow yourself a little room for straying, but not

much. And remember that there is life outside the supermarket!

For Price-conscious shoppers

To get you to part with more of your money, supermarkets will have to rely on competitive pricing and improving the quality and value of their fresh produce, as you tend to buy fresh foods at local specialty shops. You won't be tempted by 'meal solutions' (see page 8), as you tend to cook at home.

Our CHOICE supermarket price surveys (the last one was published in September 1996) are a useful guide for you, as you look for value above all else, and use the supermarket mainly for staple dry groceries.

You're a good candidate for home shopping (see page 8), as you're not enthusiastic about the shopping 'experience' — but be aware that this convenience will come at a premium (around an extra 11% on a \$100 order).

Make sure you check the pricing on those 'endcap' displays, as the goods in them are often not discounted but are just presented as if they are.

For Elitists

Supermarkets aim to attract you by further improving the quality of their fresh ingredients so you'll use them to cook at home. They are also developing stores with upmarket, specialty 'boutiques' within them, strongly differentiated by their distinct ambience and staffed by friendly personnel with specific expertise. They know this is what you like about shopping at small businesses, and it's their goal to woo you away from shopping outside their walls.

The ability to pick and choose the best is important to you, so keep supporting your favourite specialty shops. However, try keeping an eye on price as well as quality, because while you buy the best you may not always be getting the best value for money.

For Ready-to-eaters

The supermarkets are definitely after your 'share of the stomach'. Their move into 'meal solutions' is primarily for your benefit (see page 8 for details).

Their new smaller, city-centre stores (Coles Express and Woolworths Metro) are geared towards catering for your needs for breakfast, teas, lunches and dinners.

In the larger stores, in-store eateries (coffee shops, take-away outlets) are being installed to appeal to you. Shelf products designed to attract you (ready-to-eat food and drinks) will be temptingly displayed together nearby.

If you're handing over too much of your money on ready-made food, try putting a meal together at home — it'll almost certainly be cheaper even if it takes some practice to make it tastier. And for you in particular, never shop when you're hungry.



IN BRIEF

- You can get a good, durable saucepan for less than \$40.
- Some modern non-stick surfaces withstand abuse much better than earlier types you may have tried.



Saucepans

We take them for granted, but they're almost as essential to our everyday life as the food we cook in them. We put 20 popular saucepans to the test and found the priciest weren't necessarily the best.

STAINLESS STEEL SAUCEPANS HAVE BEEN THE most popular buy for some time now, but a number of new saucepans on the block — some made from new-generation non-stick materials — are making substantial inroads into the market. But what does all this mean for you? Does the price tell you what's best, or is the latest the greatest?

We put 20 of the most popular two-litre (approximately) metal saucepans costing more than \$25 to the test.

Sets or singles?

Some saucepans only come in sets, others only individually. And some can be bought as either. When considering buying a set, ask yourself whether you'll use all the pieces. You might be better off buying individual items, as this gives you greater flexibility. For example, you may want a non-stick frying pan and a stainless steel saucepan, but may not have that option if you buy a set.

You can buy all the saucepans we tested singly. Check the table on pages 16 and 17 to see which ones you can also buy in a set.

What makes a good saucepan?

A good saucepan is one that not only cooks well, but is durable, easy to use, and has been designed with safety in mind.

- To test how well the saucepans cooked we looked at how efficiently and evenly they heated, and whether food stuck to the bottom.
- For durability we checked whether the saucepans pitted, stained or buckled when subjected to corrosive liquids and extreme temperatures.
- We tested how easy a saucepan was to use by assessing its balance and weight, the comfort of its handle, how easy it was to clean, whether it dribbled when pouring, and whether any steam vents were easy to control.
- Finally, we looked to see if there were any sharp edges on the saucepans, if handles and knobs got very hot, how stable they were on the cooktop, and whether steam vented and condensed safely (for example, whether steam condensed on the handle).

THE BEST

equal	FISSLER Coronal Cookstar	\$165
equal	TEFAL Armatal*	\$99
equal	BISTRO Classic	\$64
	DAVID JONES	\$70
	SCANPAN 2001+ 17115*	\$149
	* Non-stick	

GOOD VALUE

FINEMARK Vitesse CK443	\$25
PREMIUM	\$35

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The base

- Does it have a heat-conducting metal such as copper built into the base (see *Material matters*, page 16)? You can sometimes see the different layers of metal, but not always. Manufacturers usually highlight this as a feature, however.
- Manufacturers recommend that the saucepan base should be the same size as or slightly larger than the cooking element for safe and efficient cooking. Measure the diameter of your elements before you go shopping if you want to check.

Handles and knobs

- The best handles and knobs are ones that are easy to grasp firmly in such a way that your fingers won't touch the body or lid of the saucepan — to avoid being burnt.
- Contoured handles can often be more comfortable — when the saucepan is full, you'll appreciate a comfortable handle.
- Generally, handles and knobs that are attached with small screws tend to come loose.
- In our test, the metal components of the **LE CHASSEUR** handle lost their lustre, and the wooden section expanded slightly after three dishwashing cycles. This was despite being labelled 'dishwasher-safe'. If you want to use a dishwasher you may be better off avoiding wooden handles and knobs.



The base of a saucepan is sometimes 'set in' from its walls. Our tests found this made no difference to cooking performance as long as the base was no more than 1 cm further in than the sides.

FAR LEFT: Check whether the handle is comfortable to hold and pour with before you buy. Some, like the Ikea pictured, may look smart but be uncomfortable.

LEFT: Straight-sided pans can be harder to pour from — like the Meyer, pictured.

BELOW: Aluminium, copper, cast iron and glass all have their pros and cons as materials for saucepans, but stainless steel is still the most popular and durable. Some modern non-stick coatings, however, also do well for durability. See *The scratch test* on page 15 and *Material matters* on page 16 for more on this.

Other features

- Does it have a handle you can hang on a hook, and will the lid stay on in this position?
- Do you need it to be dishwasher- or oven-safe?
- Does it have any sharp edges that could catch or scratch?

The surface

- The saucepans which performed best in the test of whether food stuck to the bottom had either a non-stick interior surface or stainless steel with a mirror finish.

Lid and steam vent

- Is there a steam vent? Is it easy to control with one hand? Are there markings to tell you whether it's open or closed?

Lip

- In our test, the straight-edged **MEYER** was very difficult to pour from (see the photo, above right). Unfortunately, though, just because a saucepan has a spout doesn't mean it's easy to pour from either — as we found with the heavy **LE CHASSEUR** and **LE CREUSET** pots. The spouts would only allow very slow pouring, which was very difficult given the weight of the saucepans.

Balance and weight

- Is it comfortable to lift and carry? Remember it will be heavier full of food. Some testers found the enamelled cast iron pans (**LE CHASSEUR** and **LE CREUSET**) difficult to lift with one hand when full (see the photo, overleaf).



PROFILES

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.



The enameled cast iron Le Creuset and Le Chasseur saucepans are heavy even when empty. Full of food they become very difficult to carry and pour from. Although cast iron gives a very even heat throughout the pan that's particularly good for long, slow cooking, its weight makes it much more suitable for a casserole dish than a saucepan.



Check whether there's enough room for your fingers to grasp the handle without touching the lid and perhaps burning yourself.



Fissler Coronal Cookstar

Target price: \$165

Good points

- Equal best overall: rated 'very good' in performance tests and was equal best for ease of use.
- Equal best for evenness of heating.
- Easy to grasp lid knob, and fingers are well protected from hot lid.
- Has an adjustable steam vent.
- Very easy to clean.

Bad points

- Relatively expensive.
- Some staining during durability tests.



Tefal Armatal

Target price: \$99

Good points

- Equal best overall: rated 'very good' in performance tests and was equal best for ease of use.
- Equal best for evenness of heating.
- Non-stick surface worked well.
- Comfortable contoured handle.
- Has an adjustable steam vent.
- Did not pit or stain during durability tests.
- Very easy to clean.
- Relatively lightweight.

Bad points

- No markings to indicate whether steam vent is open or closed.
- Non-stick lining needs special care — don't use any metal utensils. This was the worst performer in our tough scratch test of non-stick linings (see below right).
- One of the slowest to boil water.

GOOD VALUE



Finemark Vitesse

Target price: \$25

Good points

- Equal second for ease of use.
- Very well balanced.
- Has an adjustable steam vent.
- Fastest to boil water.

Bad points

- No markings to indicate whether steam vent is open or closed.
- Some surface damage during durability tests.
- A screw in the lid corroded during durability tests.



Premium

Target price: \$35

Good points

- Equal second for ease of use.
- Equal best in the test of whether food sticks to the bottom.
- Second fastest to boil water.
- Has an adjustable steam vent.
- Very easy to clean.
- Relatively lightweight.

Bad points

- Some surface damage during durability tests.
- No markings to indicate whether steam vent is open or closed.

shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in September/October 1997. Anything lower is a bargain.



Bistro Classic

Target price: \$64

Good points

- Equal second for performance.
- Equal best for evenness of heating.
- Easy to use.
- Relatively lightweight.
- Did not pit or stain during durability tests.
- Very easy to clean.

Bad points

- No steam vent, but steam vented safely from the rim.
- Lid handle is a little small for large hands, so there's a risk of burning fingers on the lid.



David Jones

Target price: \$70

Good points

- Equal second for performance.
- Equal best for evenness of heating.
- Easy to use.
- Very easy to clean.
- Long handle, which means you can use two hands if necessary.
- One of the fastest to boil water.
- Did not pit or stain during durability tests.
- Lid fits well; stays on when saucepan is hung up for storage.

Bad points

- No steam vent, but steam vented safely from rim.
- Risk of burning fingers on area below lid handle.
- Usable volume quite a bit lower than that claimed — 2 L instead of 2.3 L.

Other comments

- Glass lid.



Scanpan 2001+

Target price: \$149

Good points

- Rated 'very good' in performance tests.
- Equal best for evenness of heating.
- Non-stick surface worked well, and it was the best of the non-stick pans in the scratch test of non-stick linings.
- Very easy to clean.
- Very good for pouring — has two spouts.
- Did not pit or stain during durability tests.
- Comfortable contoured handle.

Bad points

- Risk of burning fingers on area below lid handle.
- Slowest to boil water.
- Permanently open steam vents (spouts).
- Relatively expensive.

Other comments

- Glass lid (can be purchased separately if it breaks).

The scratch test

In order to test the life of the surfaces of non-stick saucepans, we used a Scotch Brite and a stainless steel scourer (the latter is supplied with the **SCANPAN**) to scratch the pans (up to 10,000 times with the Scotch Brite and 5000 times with the steel scourer, or until a patch about the size of a postage stamp of bare metal was exposed. This was performed on both dry and wet surfaces).

While this is far from the normal treatment recommended for non-stick surfaces, it's a good test to compare the durability of the various non-stick saucepans.

Of the four non-stick pans in the test, the **SCANPAN** came through the best, with no sign of bare metal showing. The **MEYER** and **MORGANWARE** showed a little metal in some of the tests, but given the severity of the tests we don't think there's much chance of a problem in normal use.

The **TEFAL**'s non-stick surface came off much more easily, so you'd need to take care when cooking with it, as well as handling and storing it. The manufacturer recommends against using metal utensils with this pan.

We cooked in the four pans after the scratch tests, and although each of them had a few sticky sections where the coating had been scratched, the food was easily removed with a wooden spoon.

We also tried our scratch test on the enamel surfaces of the **LE CHASSEUR** and **LE CREUSET** pans — the only result was a slight discolouration.



The Tefal's non-stick surface came off quite easily in our scratch test — you'd need to take care when cooking, as well as handling and storing it.

2 L SAUCEPANS

	Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Warranty (years)	Target price (\$)*	Base material	Body material	Dishwash oven safe
equal	FISSLER Coronal Cookstar	Cambur Industries	Germany	'Lifetime'	165	ss	ss	✓ / no
	TEFAL Armatel	Zyliss	France	'Lifetime' (c)	99	Aluminium	ss (non-stick lining)	✓ / ns
equal	BISTRO Classic	Milners	China	'Lifetime'	64	Aluminium and ss	ss	✓ / ✓
	DAVID JONES (A)	David Jones	Korea	25	70	ss	ss	ns / ns
	SCANPAN 2001+ 17115 (A)	Sheldon & Hammond	Denmark	10 (d)	149	Cast aluminium	Cast aluminium (e)	✓ (g) / to 2
equal	BRABANTIA First Class	Brabantia	Belgium	10	105	Aluminium and ss	ss	✓ / ✓
	FINEMARK Vitesse CK443	Finemark Homewares	China	25	25	Copper and ss	18/8 ss	✓ (g) / ns
	PREMIUM (A)	Big W	Not stated	25	35	ss	ss	✓ (g) / ns
	RACO Classic RPM33	Meyer Cookware	China	'Lifetime'	98	Copper and ss	ss	✓ (g) / ns
	ESSTEEL Australis 2000 C214 (A)	Silcraft	Australia	'Lifetime'	115	Copper and ss	ss	✓ / ns
	TARGET Copper Base (A)	Target	China	Not stated	39	Copper and ss	ss	✓ / ns
equal	MEYER Analon Professional 81137	Meyer Cookware	Hong Kong	'Lifetime'	89	Anodised aluminium	Anodised aluminium (f)	no / ✓
	ESCOFFIER 10233	Milners	Korea	'Lifetime'	99	Copper and ss	ss	✓ / ✓
	KINOX Krystal Gold 8180S/18 (A)	CPS Housewares	China	25	70	Aluminium and ss	ss	✓ / no
equal	ARCOSTEEL Clearview (A)	Thebe International	China	Not stated	50	Copper and ss	ss	ns / ns
	SPRING Cristal GL J 7553-6/16	Zyliss	Switzerland	'Lifetime'	147	ss	ss	✓ / ✓
	IKEA Fanfar	Ikea	Korea	'Lifetime'	35	Aluminium and ss	18/8 ss	✓ / ✓
	MORGANWARE Centuria (A)	Morganware	Indonesia	20	53	ss	ss (non-stick lining)	✓ / ✓
	LE CREUSET Vitrobase	Milners	France	Not stated	159	Cast iron / enamel	Cast iron / enamel	no / ✓
	LE CHASSEUR Invicta 19603 (B)	Sheldon & Hammond	France	'Lifetime'	110	Cast iron / enamel	Cast iron / enamel	✓ / no

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in September/October 1997.

** The measured volume is the amount of water the pan can hold with the lid on.

ss Stainless steel.

ns Not stated.

(A) Also available as part of a set.

(B) There are similar models in different colours: 19503 (blue); 19703 (green); 19803 (yellow). The 19603 is maroon.

(C) On non-stick lining only.

(D) Has a 'lifetime' warranty on evenness of base surface.

(E) With a non-stick ceramic titanium surface.

(F) This is a non-stick surface.

(G) But hand washing is preferable.

Material matters: stainless steel still rules

■ **Stainless steel** is the most popular material for saucepans because it's strong, hard and non-corrosive. However, it doesn't conduct heat very well, so many saucepans made from it have a base that also contains a layer of metal which is a good conductor, such as aluminium or copper. Sometimes these are referred to as 'sandwiched' bases.

■ **Copper** saucepans are good conductors of heat and look good hanging on the kitchen wall, but they're pricy, not easy to keep clean and need to be coated so the copper doesn't contaminate the food. They're useful for cooking, however, when temperature control is crucial. We didn't test any copper pans.

■ **Aluminium** is light, heat resistant and conducts heat well, but will tend to pit if moist food is left standing in it. If you're cooking acidic foods (such as tomatoes) in aluminium, some may be absorbed into the food. However, evidence to date doesn't suggest you need to worry about getting Alzheimer's disease from cooking with this material.

■ **Cast iron** gives very even heat transfer at low settings, but it takes longer to heat up and cool down, and can rust and become brittle. Enamel coatings can help stop rust but these can craze or chip if roughly handled. The worst thing about a cast iron saucepan, though, is that it's very heavy even when it's empty — let alone full of food!

■ **Non-stick** cookware prevents food from sticking, so minimal amounts of oil or butter are needed. This type of saucepan has traditionally meant non-stick linings that are easy to clean but not as durable as plain metal — especially if you use the wrong type of cleaning products.

According to manufacturers, however, new-generation anodised aluminium (like the **MEYER**) and ceramic titanium (like the **SCANPAN**) pans are making non-stick a more desirable option.

Anodising is a special kind of treatment which coats the metal, making it harder and giving a non-stick surface that's difficult to scratch or rub off.

Ceramic titanium is very hard and resistant to very high heat and corrosion. The inside surface of the saucepan is pitted and the non-stick lining is applied in the pits so that metal utensils and scourers can be used without fear of removing it.

Some other non-stick surfaces may get into food if they're scraped off while you're cooking, although there's no evidence at this stage to suggest that this would be harmful to your health. Some non-stick linings such as Teflon may also give off fumes when very hot. This is likely to happen only when the saucepan is heated empty for a long time. If you keep birds in the kitchen, note that they're believed to be very sensitive to such fumes, which might kill them.

■ Other new products include pots that are designed for the new induction cookers, which need cookware that has a magnetic material such as iron in its base. Of the pans in this test, the **DAVID JONES**, **FISSLER**, **LE CREUSET** and **MORGANWARE** are claimed by manufacturers to be suitable for induction cooktops.

■ **Glass** is a poor heat conductor but doesn't stain, looks good and you can see what you're cooking all the time. We didn't test glass saucepans because they aren't very popular.

3

4

5

Weight (kg)	Stated / measured volume (L) **	Steam vents	Rim, lip or spout	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)	
1.1	1.7 / 1.8	✓ — adjustable	Lip	83	84	84	FISSLER Coronal Cookstar	equal
0.9	2.0 / 2.0	✓ — adjustable	Lip	84	84	84	TEFAL Armatal	
0.8	2.0 / 2.0		Lip	88	78	83	BISTRO Classic	equal
1.0	2.3 / 2.0		Rim	88	78	83	DAVID JONES (A)	
1.4	1.75 / 1.9	Through spout	2 spouts	82	80	81	SCANPAN 2000+ 17115 (A)	
1.1	2.3 / 2.3	3 x 3 mm holes in side of lid	Rim	86	72	79	BRABANTIA First Class	equal
1.0	2.0 / 2.0	✓ — adjustable	Lip	76	82	79	FINEMARK Vitesse CK443	
1.0	ns / 2.0	✓ — adjustable	Rim	74	82	78	PREMIUM (A)	
1.2	2.2 / 2.2	✓ — adjustable	Rim	72	80	76	RACO Classic RPM33	
1.2	2.0 / 2.0	✓ — adjustable	Rim	74	76	75	ESSTEEL Australis 2000 C214 (A)	equal
0.9	ns / 1.9	✓ — adjustable	Lip	74	76	75	TARGET Copper Base (A)	
1.2	1.9 / 1.9		Straight edge	89	58	74	MEYER Anolon Professional 81137	
1.0	1.9 / 1.8		Lip	72	72	72	ESCOFFIER 10233	equal
1.3	2.2 / 2.3		Rim	72	72	72	KINOX Krystal Gold 8180S/18 (A)	
1.2	ns / 2.0		Rim	69	70	70	ARCOSTEEL Clearview (A)	equal
1.0	ns / 2.0		Lip	72	68	70	SPRING Cristal GL J 7553-6/16	
0.8	2.0 / 2.2		Lip	74	62	68	IKEA Fanfar	
1.0	ns / 2.1		Rim	64	66	65	MORGANWARE Centuria (A)	
2.8	2.0 / 2.0	Through spout	Spout	70	52	61	LE CREUSET Vitrobase	
3.1	ns / 2.4	Through spout	Spout	68	50	59	LE CHASSEUR Invicta 19603 (B)	

Some of the saucepans will be found in specialist home/kitchen shops rather than in department stores.

1 Warranty

'Lifetime' warranty is much less useful than a specified length of time. Unless 'lifetime' is more fully defined in the warranty details, all it basically means is that the saucepan is guaranteed to last as long as it lasts.

2 Base and body materials

Those that show two metals for the base have a sandwiched base (see page 13). The two elements that give stainless steel (ss) its properties are chromium and nickel — '18/10' and '18/8' indicate the respective percentages claimed to be in the saucepan, although we've found no evidence that one works better than the other. All stainless steel in this column is 18/10 except where indicated as 18/8.

3 Performance score

This consists of a combination of the following cooking and durability tests, weighted equally:

- **Evenness of heating:** This was determined by how evenly white sauce and egg white cooked.
- **Food not sticking:** Determined by how hard it was to remove scrambled eggs cooked in the saucepan.

■ **Speed of heating:** Determined by measuring how long it took to boil water on an electric ceramic-glass hotplate.

■ **Durability:** Determined by the tendency of the saucepan's surface to stain or pit when a salty solution was cooked in it and an acidic solution was left in it for 48 hours. We also checked whether the saucepan deformed when it was heated empty to 300°C before being plunged into tepid water.

Saucepans for people with special needs

If you can't grip things very well, look for a saucepan that:

- Is lightweight.
- Has two handles with plenty of space for grasping the pot without burning yourself by touching the sides (although we didn't test any like this).
- Has a long enough handle to carry with two hands — preferably one that's contoured and reasonably thick.
- If you have a lack of feeling in your hands you may want to choose a saucepan that's designed to prevent you touching hot surfaces. This reduces the chance of you burning yourself without realising it. Look for a saucepan that has a lid knob or handle with a lot of space to grasp it without touching the lid.
- A saucepan that's easy to clean — possibly non-stick — could also be useful for people with hand problems.

4 Ease of use score

The ease of use score was assessed by taking into equal consideration balance and weight, comfort of the handle, steam control, and how easy the saucepan was to clean by hand and to pour from.

5 Overall score

The overall score gave equal weighting to ease of use and performance.



If you have hand problems, look for a saucepan with a long handle so you can use two hands, such as the David Jones (pictured).



Green greens — organic food and the environment

IN BRIEF

■ Organic farming doesn't simply mean chemical-free — it's a system of farming based on sustainability and environmental sensitivity.

■ At present, only food certified as organic gives you some guarantee of environmental best practice.

■ Organic food tends to be more expensive than conventionally farmed food, but more people are deciding it's a small price to pay to help protect the environment.

PEOPLE GIVE A NUMBER OF REASONS for buying organic food, such as concern about chemical residues or their belief in its superior taste and nutritional properties (see *What's in it for me*, page 20). But for a growing number of people, the main reason to go organic is their concern for the environment. Many farmers who choose to grow organically are doing so out of a similar concern for the environment and the long-term sustainability of their land.

Many practices in conventional agriculture are not ecologically sustainable — devastating environmental damage bears testament to that. Over half of Australia's farmland needs remedial treatment of some sort, mostly because of damaging farming practices — for example, wholesale land clearing

Traditional reasons for buying organic, such as claims about its health, taste and nutrition, are starting to take a back seat to concerns about the environment and the long-term sustainability of agriculture.

and sustained use of pesticides and fertilisers. These practices have resulted in problems such as soil acidification, salinity and erosion; pesticide poisoning of wildlife; and outbreaks of toxic algae in rivers.

But the issue goes beyond environmental damage — the long-term sustainability of food production is under threat. As the world population grows, so does the demand for food and, with that, a demand for farmland. We can't afford to render land useless for future generations.

What is organic farming?

Organic farming (including 'biodynamic', 'biological' and 'ecological' farming) is a system of ecologically sustainable agriculture which avoids using synthetic pesticides, fertilisers, growth regulators, livestock feed additives and any other substances that are or may be harmful. But it's not only about eliminating synthetic chemicals — it's a system of agriculture that considers the farm itself as a complete ecosystem, both within itself and as part of a larger ecosystem. The objective of this system is to be sustainable, and in achieving this, organic farming addresses many of the environmental problems arising from conventional farming.

One of the main aims of organic farming is to maintain or improve the fertility and level of organic matter in the soil. This benefits the soil's structure, aeration and moisture-holding capacity and the activity of soil micro-organisms — and healthy soils are less prone to erosion. Compost, green manures (plants grown to be turned into the soil), composted animal manures and approved mineral products (such as limestone, rock phosphate and dolomite) are used instead of synthetic fertilisers.

Organic farmers aim to operate in harmony with the surrounding environment. Rather than rely on chemical fertilisers, this avocado farmer takes advantage of legumes growing under the trees to provide the soil with nitrogen.



Another major aim is to maintain the biodiversity of the farm and its surroundings, including the protection of plant and wildlife habitats. In practical terms, this means developing natural areas through revegetation and restoration where necessary — clearing native vegetation is generally not permitted by organic certification bodies.

Wildlife also benefits because organic farmers use non-chemical methods of pest control (see *Alternatives to pesticides*, page 20, for some examples).

Organic farms that depend on irrigation must take into account their impact on ecosystems such as waterways and wetlands. Irrigation management includes planting trees and shrubs to prevent problems associated with a rising watertable, such as waterlogging and salinisation.

Going organic

If you're concerned about the environment, buying organic food is one way to take action.

When you're shopping, buy certified organic produce (see *Organic certification*, below) instead of conventionally farmed produce — encourage your local shop or supermarket to stock produce that's certified organic. If you have trouble finding organic food in the shops, some organic food suppliers home-deliver fruit and vegetables, and perhaps other products — look under 'Organic produce' in the Yellow Pages.

You might have to become an opportunistic shopper, taking advantage of what's available in the

organic range, rather than buying to a set list. Your choice of fruit and vegetables, for instance, may vary according to the seasons.

Apart from fresh fruit and vegetables, which dominate the organic produce market, there are many other organic food products, including fresh herbs, nuts, dairy products, meat, poultry, coffee, tea, wine and even processed foods.

Does it cost more?

Organic food may cost more than conventionally farmed food. This is mainly because organic farmers employ more workers and, as their operations tend to be smaller, they don't benefit from economies of

If you buy organic food you may only find what's in season, rather than fruit and vegetables that have been artificially encouraged to grow all year round.



Organic certification

How can you be sure whether the organic produce you're paying a premium price for is really organic? One way is to check it has been certified as organic. There are a number of organic food certifiers, each with its own label or logo. Five of these bodies have been approved by the Federal Government's Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS):

- National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA).
- Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA).
- Biodynamic Research Institute (BDRI).
- Organic Herb Growers of Australia (OHGA).
- Organic Vignerons Association of Australia (OVAA).

The Tasmanian Organic-dynamic Producers (TOP), Eco-Organics of Australia and Organic Food Chain are currently applying for accreditation.

Certifiers inspect member producers at least once a year to make sure they're meeting the required organic standards. AQIS then audits the organic certifiers once a year, to verify that the inspections occur, and conducts random checks of individual producers. Although the system may not be completely foolproof, it's your best guarantee that food has been produced according to environmental best practice.

The current system is very confusing when you're shopping — it means you're faced with a number of different organic food labels and logos (some AQIS-approved and some not). However, a recently formed umbrella organisation, the Organic Federation, should go some way to simplifying the situation — we'll keep you posted.



Reg. Trade Mark



ORGANIC HERB GROWERS OF AUSTRALIA Inc
P.O. Box 6171, South Lismore, N.S.W. 2480





What's in it for me?

Some people argue that the main reason for going organic is that the food tastes better, has a higher level of nutrients and lower levels of chemical residues. But is it true?

Taste

The jury's still out on this one — various controlled taste tests haven't shown that one method of farming produces consistently tastier food than another.

Nutrition

Some tests have found some organic foods are higher in some nutrients than conventionally farmed food, while in other tests there were no differences.

Chemical residues

The jury's still out on this question too. The government regularly tests food, and has not yet found any cause for concern about levels of chemical residues in conventionally farmed food — residues have been found, but not in quantities thought sufficiently harmful to be a health issue.

However, critics claim that the so-called 'safe' levels don't always take into account the long-term dietary intake of the chemicals (that is, their cumulative effects) and that the surveys are far too limited in scope.

So, to return to the question, "What's in it for me?", the answer may be: "Nothing as an individual." But if you're concerned about the long-term sustainability of food production and a reduction in land degradation, buying organic food could be a small way of putting your money where your mouth is.

scale in production, marketing and transport. While these costs are offset to some extent by savings on fertilisers and pesticides, a study commissioned by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation found that most organic farmers need to charge up to 20% more to be viable.

Alternatives to pesticides

Many farmers using conventional practices are gradually recognising that it's not in their best long-term interests to continue with environmentally damaging farming methods, and are looking for alternatives. The excessive use of pesticides is of particular concern, especially in northern Europe, and integrated pest management (IPM) is an increasingly appealing alternative.

Drawing on an extensive knowledge of insect and plant biology, IPM uses biologically based methods of controlling pests, including:

- Companion planting (certain plants can give other plants grown nearby increased resistance to pests and diseases).
- Attracting birds and 'friendly' insects that prey on pests.
- Plant extracts, such as garlic, derris and pyrethrum.
- Certain mineral preparations, such as white oil, copper sulphate and potassium permanganate.
- Physical barriers, or traps such as sticky paper.

Chemical pesticides are used only as a last resort. This is undoubtedly a major step forward from using chemical pesticides routinely, but when you're in the supermarket, how can you tell which fruit and vegetables were grown using IPM? At present, unfortunately, you can't.

A different kind of strategy, heavily promoted to farmers by agrochemical companies, is the use of genetically modified seeds. The genes may be altered to provide 'natural bio-pesticides' or make the plants resistant to

However, conservationists argue that we're not paying for the true price of conventionally farmed food, because the costs of rectifying environmental degradation are not included. Rather, we pay for that indirectly through taxes, or pass the costs on to future generations.

particular diseases. But other modifications include making the plants resistant to the company's own weedkiller, such as Monsanto's Round-up-resistant soy beans — hardly a meaningful step off the pesticide treadmill. Organic certification bodies consider genetically modified foods to be incompatible with the principles of sustainability, and won't certify them.

At this stage, buying certified organic produce is the best available guarantee that the food you're buying has been farmed using environmentally sound methods.



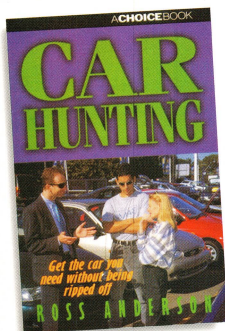
COURTESY OF MARK CAMP TEA TREE OIL

Instead of chemical pesticides, some farmers use 'friendly' predator insects which eat unwanted pests.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NSW DEPT OF LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION

Over half of Australia's farmland needs remedial treatment, mostly as a result of non-sustainable agricultural practices.

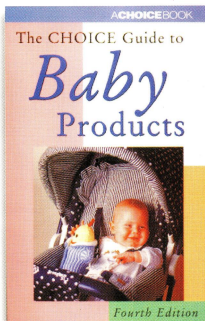


Car Hunting

If you're planning to buy or sell a car, *Car Hunting* strips away the mysteries of the car trade. It covers:

- Tricks dealers use.
- Buying and selling privately.
- How to get the best price for your trade-in.
- What to avoid at auctions.

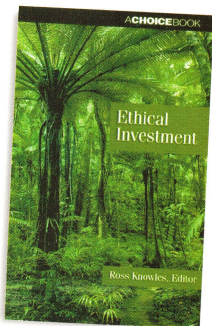
S16 Code: CARH



The CHOICE Guide to Baby Products

The *CHOICE Guide to Baby Products* offers both general and specific buying advice for a new baby's requirements. It includes practical information about cots, pramettes, car restraints, first-aid kits, childcare, maternity bras, feeding your baby, nappies, immunisation and safety.

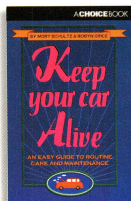
S16 Code: CBP4



Ethical Investment

In the first Australian book on this topic, the expert contributors suggest issues to consider when looking at a company's ethics. It gives details of and rates 22 ethical investments, and gives examples of how to invest in your own home (tax-free), and indirectly in the environment, by making your home energy-efficient.

S15 Code: ETHI



Keep Your Car Alive

Keep Your Car Alive explains in non-technical terms how a car works and what simple steps you can take to keep yours running efficiently for as long as possible.

"I really couldn't find anything they missed." *The Age*

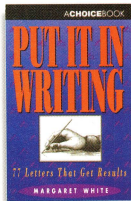
S16 Code: KYCA



Let's Be Reasonable

This book explains the techniques of negotiation, mediation, conciliation and arbitration, and litigation; and explains how and when to use them successfully. *Let's Be Reasonable* gives detailed practical advice on common matters of dispute, and suggests dispute resolution methods which may resolve them.

S15 Code: LBR

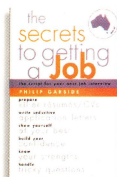


Put It In Writing

While you may pick up the phone if you have a problem with someone's actions, goods or services, you'll probably be asked to "put it in writing" to trigger a response. *Put It In Writing* has 77 well thought-out and authoritative letters that can be adapted to suit your particular needs.

S16 Code: PIW

CONSUMER BOOKSHELF

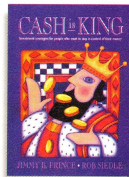


The Secrets to Getting a Job

When you apply for a job you not only need to have appropriate

qualifications, but you must present them clearly and convincingly. To avoid missing the job you want, *The Secrets to Getting a Job* provides you with advice and techniques that will help you improve your letters, résumés, interviews, confidence and job-hunting.

\$15 Code: SGAI

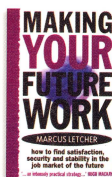


Cash is King

Cash is King covers 30 different types of cash-based investment,

giving the advantages and disadvantages of each, with the most common terms and conditions, and relevant taxation issues. It also discusses retirement planning, using professional managers, and financial institutions and their charges.

\$25 Code: CIK

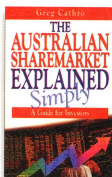


Making Your Future Work

The Australian job market is changing — people in full-time jobs are

working longer hours and more people are taking part-time jobs. *Making Your Future Work* looks at the future of the Australian job market and how you should plan for and prosper in this changing environment.

\$17 Code: MYFW

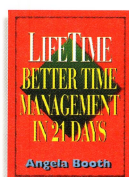


The Australian Sharemarket Explained Simply

The Australian

Sharemarket Explained Simply includes information on how to make realistic buying and selling decisions on the Australian sharemarket. With more Australians investing in the sharemarket than ever before, a clear understanding of just how it works is essential.

\$20 Code: ASES

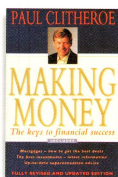


LifeTime: Better Time Management in 21 Days

Time management is an important skill, not only for work

but for living in the late 20th century. This book provides a 20-minutes-a-day program to help you learn the skills that will help you focus, determine values and set appropriate goals to manage your time better.

\$20 Code: LT21



Making Money

Now completely revised and updated, this popular book about taking

control of your finances includes details for getting control of your money, starting a savings plan, budgeting, getting the best deal on your mortgage, the job market, investing in shares and property, tax, wills and bankruptcy.

\$20 Code: MMEY

Order Form

Code	Title	Qty	Item price	Total price

Plus postage and handling (\$3 for one item plus \$1.20 for each extra item)

Total

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☐ Amex ☐ Diners Club Expiry / /

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Name on card Signature

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms Subscriber number

Address

Postcode Phone (bus.)

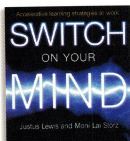
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22 • CHOICE January/February 1998

Some books may have to be sent separately to keep postage costs down. Please allow 2 to 3 weeks for delivery. If any order cannot be filled for a substantial length of time, we'll let you know and give you the option of cancellation.

1M9802 INS



Switch on Your Mind

Switch on Your Mind presents a series of learning strategies that are particularly useful in your

working environment. This book can help you improve your memory, concentration, team-building and strategic planning skills.

\$25 Code: SOYM

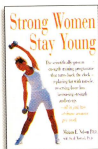


Get Smart or Ripped Off

The author of Get Smart or

Ripped Off has used his years of experience in the motor industry to put together this book (with worksheets) to help you avoid being ripped off, overserviced or overcharged when you have your car repaired. He also suggests ways to prevent minor problems becoming major problems, and how to reduce vehicle wear and tear.

\$10 Code: GSRO

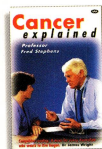


Strong Women Stay Young

This book presents a strengthening exercise program for women from 30 years of age that may improve health and vitality. It also includes exercises to do at home and advice about incorporating these

exercises into an existing gym program.

\$20 Code: SWSY

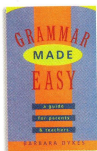


Cancer Explained

A distinguished Australian cancer specialist explains the diseases of cancer in clear lay terms, covering causes and various treatments. It includes support groups and how to minimise the risks of contracting cancer. A

useful book for either specific information or a general overview of the topic.

\$20 Code: CNEX

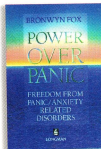


Grammar Made Easy

Grammar needn't be a bugbear or inhibit your expression. Using step-by-step exercises (and answers) *Grammar Made Easy* explains grammar in simple terms that will have you discussing gerunds, adjectival clauses,

prepositions and nouns with the best of them!

\$17 Code: GME



Power over Panic

Panic and anxiety disorders affect more than 12% of Australians each year. *Power over Panic* presents an easy-to-follow system that anyone can use to cope with a range of

panic and anxiety disorders. Written by someone who has experienced and understands panic disorders, this book is recommended by the Panic Anxiety Disorder Association Inc.

\$15 Code: POP



How to Stay Sane in Your Baby's First Year

A good basic guide to coping with the first year of a baby's life. Written for Australian parents (including a section with support group addresses), this book covers dealing

with crying and lack of sleep, breastfeeding, bottlefeeding, travelling with a baby, relaxation techniques, caring for a sick baby, and has a useful section on survival techniques for new parents.

\$18 Code: SSBY

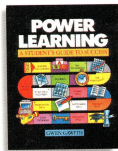


Teach Yourself to Meditate

Stress is a major factor in modern life, sometimes for good, but unfortunately it can also cause tension and even illness. Meditation is a widely recognised technique for combating these negative effects. This useful guide

offers a series of meditation exercises that you can use to relax your body and mind.

\$17 Code: TYTM

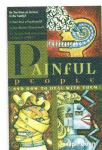


Power Learning

Power Learning helps you identify your learning style and how to use this information to maximise your true potential. *Power Learning* includes information about

improving your memory, study habits, note-taking skills and exam techniques.

\$14.50 Code: PL

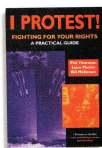


Painful People

Painful People examines a number of different, and perhaps difficult, personalities using interesting case studies that help you identify and understand the different personality types. The author then offers practical advice

about how to make dealing with these people less painful for you.

\$18 Code: PPEO



I Protest!

I Protest! is a step-by-step guide to making your protest effective. It includes inspiring examples from people who have successfully had their protests heard, ideas for writing letters that get noticed and attract media attention,

and how to plan effective campaigns.

\$17 Code: IPRO



When Will the Children Play?

We are led to believe that children need an 'enriched' social environment, but isn't it also important for children to have time to be themselves?

When Will the Children Play? suggests

that parents should trust their own judgment about their children's needs, and that allowing them to develop at their own pace will best equip most children to lead fulfilling lives.

\$18 Code: WWCP

Globally mobile

There's a big call for digital mobile phones in Australia. And thanks to international standards you can use yours not only here, but also in many overseas countries.



IN THIS ARTICLE

- Test results for 16 digital mobile phones, including one with a built-in computer processor (pages 28 and 29).
- Tips on how to buy both a mobile phone and a call plan that meet your needs (page 27).

THE AUSTRALIAN DIGITAL MOBILE phone networks are compatible with the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM), which is also used in most of Europe, the Middle East and parts of Asia.

This means that not only can you use your mobile when travelling in one of those countries, but also that we were able to join a test of digital mobile phones carried out by our Belgian counterparts, using European GSM networks.

This report presents the test results for 16 models,

including the NOKIA 9000 Communicator — a mobile phone with a built-in computer processor and additional features and functions (see *Your office in a pocket*, right, for details).

Small, light, feature-packed

Compared to our last test of mobile phones (CHOICE, January 1996), most models in this test are smaller and lighter — you can carry them in your pocket.

The phones have a lot of features and functions — see *Features they all have* and the table notes on pages 28 and 29 for some that we think may interest you.

Which are the best?

■ The MOTOROLA d668 had the worst sound quality (voices weren't always easily intelligible). All other models achieved 'good' or 'very good' results, with the ALCATEL HD1 One Touch Easy scoring highest (see note 8, page 29, for details of the test).

■ The SIEMENS S6 was the easiest model to use, the MOTOROLA d160, PHILIPS diga, NOKIA 1610 Plus and 9000 Communicator the most difficult. There was little difference between the rest of the tested models (see note 10, page 29, for details of the test).

■ Generally, the higher the battery capacity, measured in milliampere hours (mAh), the longer it lasts. However, the phone software, the SIM card used and the network conditions also influence battery performance in a mobile phone (see note 7, page 28, for details).

Most tested batteries took between one and two hours to recharge, using a plug-in recharger (which means you don't have to remove the battery from

How mobile phones work

A mobile phone network is made up of a series of base stations that are linked to the standard telephone system and send and receive the radio signals used by mobile phones. The area covered by one base station is called a 'cell', and cells are arranged to overlap slightly to ensure continuous coverage.

When you switch your phone on it connects with the base station that offers the strongest signal. If you move to an area covered by another cell, the network automatically switches you to that one.

Ideally, you won't even notice this. However, dropouts can occur when the new base station is already working to its capacity, or when you're leaving a cell area which doesn't have an overlapping cell.

Also, obstructions such as buildings or mountains can shade areas and cause them to have a weak signal. It depends on your phone's sensitivity, how weak a signal it can pick up — the table on page 29 shows the sensitivity scores of the phones in this test. If you're often in a weak-signal area, look for a model with a high score.

There are two types of mobile phone network:

- **Analogue:** The sound waves are transmitted directly, similar to radio broadcasts.
- **Digital:** The sound is transformed into computer data, which is then transmitted and decoded at the other end. This technology is claimed to offer more protection from other people listening in, improved features such as data transfer to computers, and the ability to use your handset in a large number of overseas countries.

the phone). Exceptions were the **PHILIPS diga** (about three hours) and the **MOTOROLA d160** (about five hours).

■ The sensitivity of your phone is very important for picking up a weak signal — for example, in areas that have obstructions such as high buildings or mountains. We found considerable differences. Generally, models with an extendable antenna scored relatively high, while models with a fixed-length antenna scored relatively low.

■ In the tumble test, where we simulated the phone being dropped several times, none of the models was damaged so severely that it didn't work any more. While some phones survived the torture completely unharmed, others suffered slight damage, such as a bent antenna.

equal

WHAT TO BUY

ALCATEL HD1 One Touch Easy

MOTOROLA d160

PHILIPS diga

PANASONIC EB-G500AAUG

ALCATEL One Touch Pro

MOTOROLA International 8700

PHILIPS Spark

MOTOROLA SlimLite

You're most likely to buy your mobile phone as part of a call plan, as this is much cheaper than paying the normal retail price. That's why we haven't listed any prices in the *What to buy* list, the *Profiles* or the table.

Mobile phone etiquette

■ Switch your mobile off when you're in a cinema, theatre or restaurant, or at a sports event.

■ Don't use your mobile in hospitals and aircraft — it may interfere with electronic equipment.

Your office in a pocket?

The **NOKIA 9000 Communicator** is a mobile phone and more: it also has electronic organiser features (such as an address book, calendar, calculator, clock, alarm and world time) and a fax/modem (you can send and receive faxes from the phone itself, and — if you're connected to an appropriate Internet access provider — send and receive email and access the Internet).

However, these features and functions come at a price — we found the **NOKIA 9000** for prices between \$1300 and \$1900 outright (not as part of a call plan).

As a mobile phone

You'll find the **Communicator's** mobile phone features and test results in the table on pages 28 and 29.

- Its sensitivity is poor, so it's not a good choice if you're often in a weak-signal area.
- Some of the **Communicator's** other weaknesses can be explained by its concept: for example, it has the shortest battery standby time and 'time in use', mainly because the large display uses a lot of power. It's a bit bulky and at 400 g, it's probably too heavy to be comfortably carried in a pocket.
- It has a built-in speaker and microphone for making hands-free phone calls.

As a fax/modem

- Sending and receiving faxes with the **Communicator** is limited by its poor sensitivity, because these functions need a strong network signal.
- With the **Communicator** keypad you can type all letters individually — with all the other test phones, one key brings up several letters, so you may have to press a key several times to get the letter you want.

While this makes typing short messages (when using the short message service, SMS; see *Features they all have*, page 28) much easier than with other mobiles, the keys are too small to comfortably type longer documents.

- Viewing a received short message is much easier than with other mobiles, thanks to the large display.
- We found it very complicated to set up the **Communicator's** built-in Internet browser and email software — ask your phone supplier to do it for you.
- Using email is quite easy — but again, you need a strong network signal.

■ Internet use is very limited: the data transfer is very slow, and the display much too small.

■ You can link the **Communicator** to a computer (via a serial cable or an infrared connection) and use it for data transfer (for example, for storing a fax you've received) and as a fax/modem (for example, to send faxes or access the Internet from your computer).

However, in our test neither link worked for all the functions, and the infrared connection only worked over a distance of a few centimetres. Overall, we found its use as a fax/modem very limited.

As an organiser

While we didn't test the organiser functions extensively, they seemed to work well.

Our verdict

The **NOKIA 9000 Communicator's** use as an 'office in the pocket' is limited — you may want to wait until more refined versions of this type of product are on the market.



Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order (left to right). You're most likely to buy your handset as part of a call plan, so we haven't given a retail price for the phones themselves.



ALCATEL HD1 One Touch Easy

Good points

- Long standby time and 'time in use' with the battery tested (see note 7, page 28, for more on this).
- Best intelligibility/sound quality — voices were clear for both incoming and outgoing calls.
- Relatively easy to use.
- Not damaged at all in the tumble test.
- Can use standard AA batteries, which may be very helpful if you can't recharge the regular battery.

Bad points

- None to mention.

PHILIPS diga

Good points

- Good intelligibility/sound quality.

Bad points

- Relatively short 'time in use', but see note 7, page 28.
- Not as easy to use as many others.



MOTOROLA d160

Good points

- Long 'time in use'.
- Good intelligibility/sound quality.
- Not damaged at all in the tumble test.
- Can use standard AA batteries.

Bad points

- Not as easy to use as many others.



PANASONIC EB-G500AAUG

Good points

- Relatively easy to use.
- Vibration feature, which is useful in situations when a ringing phone would disturb others.

Bad points

- Short standby time, but see note 7, page 28.
- No muting, which means you can't turn off the microphone so that the person on the other end of the phone can't hear what you're saying to someone else at your end.



ALCATEL One Touch Pro

Good points

- Long standby time, but see note 7, page 28.
- Relatively easy to use.
- Vibration feature.

Bad points

- None to mention.

PHILIPS Spark

Good points

- Good intelligibility/sound quality.
- Voicodial function: you can store up to 10 numbers that are connected to a word (for example, a name), and 'dial' them by saying that word.
- Not damaged at all in the tumble test.
- Has slots for both small and big SIM cards, which may be useful if you have, say, a small card for work and a large one for private use.

Bad points

- Relatively poor sensitivity, so not a good choice if you're often in a weak-signal area.



MOTOROLA International 8700

Good points

- Vibration feature.

Bad points

- None to mention.



MOTOROLA SlimLite

Good points

- Lightest model tested.
- Not damaged at all in the tumble test.
- Vibration feature.

Bad points

- Short standby time and relatively short 'time in use', but see note 7, page 28.

What was wrong with the others?

- Most of the other models have a relatively low score for sensitivity (except the **MOTOROLA d668**).
- The **MOTOROLA d668** had the lowest score for sound intelligibility/quality.

How to buy a mobile phone

First ask yourself whether you really need one. If you're running your own business, for example, you probably can't live without one. On the other hand, if you only expect to make or receive a few calls each week, consider whether that's worth the cost and the hassle of carrying it with you all the time.

If you think a mobile phone is for you, there are still plenty of decisions to make and questions to ask.

Analogue or digital?

■ The analogue network is going to stop operating in most areas by January 1, 2000. However, if you find a cheap handset and call plan, you may still find it worthwhile to go analogue for the next two years.

Also, the coverage in some rural areas is better than with digital networks.

■ The digital networks offer better security for phone calls, and more features than are available on analogue phones.

What to look for in a handset

■ If you're likely to spend a lot of time on the phone, look for one with a long-lasting battery — the higher the capacity (in mAh), the longer it should last.

■ Check for features you want, and don't pay extra for those you're unlikely to use.

■ Check for ease of use. Is it comfortable to hold? Is it light enough to carry around with you? Are the keys well labelled and big enough?

■ You're unlikely to buy just a handset — it's usually part of a call plan. Make sure both the phone and the call plan meet your needs.

What to look for in a call plan

You're likely to buy a call plan — which will include a handset at relatively low cost — either directly from Telstra or Optus (which are known as 'carriers'), from a service provider (a company that buys carrier services in bulk and then repackages and sells them to consumers) or from a mobile phone shop.

■ Work out what type of user you're most likely to be. Do you only want the mobile phone for emergencies? Are you going to use it for your social life (which probably means you make mainly off-peak calls)? Or will you need it mainly during business hours?

■ Look for a plan that matches your needs, and don't just stick with one carrier; check out plans with all the ones that cover your area well (see below). For example, if you don't think you'll use the phone much, it's probably not worth paying a high monthly access fee to get cheaper call rates.

■ Check how long you have to stay with the plan (usually 12 or 18 months). You may have to pay a penalty if you leave the contract early.

■ Make sure you know the full minimum cost of the plan over that period, including the handset, connection fee, monthly access fee, call charges (there may be a minimum monthly call

fee) and fees for using features such as call diversion or voicemail.

■ Make sure the handset provides the plan meets your needs.

Choosing a carrier

There are two analogue carriers (Telstra and Optus, sharing one network) and three digital carriers (Telstra, Optus and Vodafone, with competing networks. Vodafone doesn't sell call plans direct, while the other two do).

■ Make sure your area is covered by your preferred network. Retailers usually have coverage maps. However, you should tell the salesperson the exact area where you're likely to use the phone most often (for example, the CBD or "the southern side of the mountain") — although it may be covered by the network, it might be a spot that only gets a weak signal.

If there are doubts, ask the retailer or a friend whether you can borrow a mobile phone and try it out in your area.

TOP: You can plug the charger directly into the phone to recharge the battery in all the phones we tested. ABOVE: Check coverage maps to make sure the carrier you're signing up with covers the areas you'll need.

SIM card — your mobile identity

Before you can use your digital mobile phone, you need to sign up with a carrier to enable you to connect your phone to a network (see *Choosing a carrier*, above). The carrier will give you a 'subscriber identity module' (SIM) card, which you install in the phone.

The SIM card is basically a computer chip with your phone number and a personal identification number (PIN). You can use your SIM card in any mobile phone (except a big card in a phone that takes only small ones; see note 2, page 28) — the network identifies the information on the card and charges any calls to your account.

Australian digital networks comply with an international standard called Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM), which is also used in most of Europe and parts of Asia. So when you travel to one of those countries, you can take your mobile phone with you (or you can take only your SIM card and use it in a phone you rent overseas). The calls you make are billed to your Australian account (this is called 'roaming').

You'll pay call fees relevant to the country you're in (so calls within that country will be local calls) plus a surcharge, depending on the overseas network and the network you're connected to.

If you're travelling, you can just take your SIM card with you and use it in a rented phone.



	Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Target price*	Warranty (years)	Dimensions (L x W x D; mm)**	Weight including battery (g)***	Antenna type	SIM card type	Interval beep timer	Fax and data transfer	Muting
	ALCATEL HD1 One Touch Easy	Alcatel	Europe (B)	*	1	135 x 55 x 35	215	E	S	✓	✓	✓
	MOTOROLA d160	Motorola	(C)	*	1	160 x 60 x 30	245	E	S	✓	✓	✓
	PHILIPS dliga	Philips	Singapore *	1 (D)		150 x 60 x 35	190	F	B			✓
	PANASONIC EB-G500AAUG	Panasonic	UK	*	1	140 x 45 x 25	210	E	S	✓	✓	
equal	ALCATEL One Touch Pro	Alcatel	Europe (B)	*	1	145 x 60 x 20	180	E	B	✓	✓	✓
	MOTOROLA International 8700	Motorola	(C)	*	1	130 x 60 x 25	220	E	B	✓	✓	✓
	PHILIPS Spark	Philips	Singapore *	1		140 x 65 x 25	180	E	B, S			✓
	MOTOROLA SlimLite	Motorola	(C)	*	1	145 x 60 x 25	120	E	S	✓	✓	✓
equal	MOTOROLA d668 (A)	Motorola	(C)	*	1	140 x 60 x 30	235	F	B	✓	✓	✓
	SIEMENS S6 (A)	Siemens	Germany *	1		160 x 60 x 25	170	F	S	(E)		✓
equal	ERICSSON GF 788	Ericsson	Sweden *	1		105 x 50 x 25	140	F	S		✓	✓
	MOTOROLA StarTAC 70	Motorola	(C)	*	1	100 x 60 x 30	130	E	B	✓	✓	✓
equal	ERICSSON GA 628	Ericsson	Sweden *	1		130 x 50 x 30	215	F	S		✓	✓
	NOKIA 1610 Plus	Nokia	Korea *	1 (D)		160 x 60 x 30	260	F	B			
	ERICSSON GH 688	Ericsson	Sweden *	1		130 x 50 x 30	165	F	S		✓	✓
	Mobile phone with computer processor											
	NOKIA 9000 Communicator	Nokia	Finland *	1 (D)		175 x 65 x 40	395		S		✓	

* Because you usually buy a mobile phone as part of a call plan, we don't think a retail price for the phone alone is meaningful.

** Rounded to the nearest 5 mm. The dimensions may be different when a different battery is used.

*** Rounded to the nearest 5 g. The weight may be different when a different battery is used.

(A) According to the manufacturer, this model will be discontinued early in 1998.

(B) Alcatel told us that according to EU legislation, 'Europe' is now the most specific information available on origin for its phones.

(C) This model can originate from the US, Scotland or Germany. Australian models are most likely to come from the US.

(D) Only six months on the battery.

(E) This model beeps at preset intervals, which can't be changed.

How safe are mobile phones?

There's an ongoing debate about whether the electromagnetic radiation emitted by mobile phones is a potential health risk.

Mobile phones: how safe is 'safe'? on page 30 has more on this.

1 Antenna type

An 'E' indicates the model has an extendable antenna, that the antenna has a fixed length.

2 SIM card type

2 SIM stands for 'subscriber identity module'. The SIM card identifies you to the network you've subscribed to — no matter what phone you're using. So when you're travelling, for example, you can take your SIM card with you and rent a phone at your destination.

There are two types of SIM card: 'B' (big; the size of a credit card) or 'S' (small; the size of a stamp). If you need to use a small card in a phone that only takes big ones, you can do so using an adaptor.

Interval beep timer

Models with a tick in this column beep at certain intervals during a call so that you can keep track of the time you spend on the phone. For all but the **SIEMENS S6** you can select the time interval or, in the case of the **PANASONIC EB-G500AAUG**, a cost limit.

4 Fax and data transfer

4 Models with a tick in this column can be connected to a notebook computer via a PCMCIA card, allowing you to send and receive faxes and email.

5 Muting

A tick in this column means you can switch off the microphone during a call so that the person at the other end can't hear what you're saying to somebody else at your end.

6 Vibration feature

A tick in this column indicates that you can set the phone to vibrate instead of ring — for example, when you're in a meeting or restaurant. However, you'll need to carry the phone on your body so you can feel the vibrations.

7 Standby time/time in use

■ The standby time is how long the battery lasted when we had the phone switched on and ready to receive calls, but didn't use it.

■ Time in use shows how long the battery lasted in our simulated usage cycle: for 10 hours per day we made one three-minute call per hour, and left the phone on standby for the time

Features they all have

- Battery charger that plugs directly into the phone, so you don't have to remove the battery when charging it.
- Nickel-metal-hydrate battery (NiMH) — except the **MOTOROLA SlimLite**, **SIEMENS S6** and **NOKIA 9000 Communicator**, which all had a lithium-ion battery (Li-Ion). However, you may get a different battery from the one tested (see note 7, right).
- At least eight one- or two-button fast-dial numbers.
- A redial memory for at least the last three phone numbers you've dialed.
- Keypad locking mechanism.
- Short message service (SMS), which allows you to receive short messages on the screen (for example, from your provider, telling you that you have a message in your voice-mailbox) and send messages to other mobile phones.

Standby time (hours)	Time in use (hours)	Intelligibility / sound quality score (%)	Sensitivity score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Tumble test score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)	
106	37	88	80	76	100	84	ALCATEL HD 1 One Touch Easy	
90	42	84	80	68	100	80	MOTOROLA d160	
85	22	86	80	68	80	79	PHILIPS diga	
42	25	82	80	76	60	78	PANASONIC EB-G500AUG	
108	25	80	80	76	60	77	ALCATEL One Touch Pro	
68	31	76	80	74	80	77	MOTOROLA International 8700	equal
92	28	86	60	74	100	77	PHILIPS Spark	
42	21	68	80	72	100	75	MOTOROLA SlimLite	
79	42	62	80	72	80	71	MOTOROLA d668 (A)	equal
35	21	76	40	80	100	71	SIEMENS S6 (A)	
46	23	82	40	72	100	70	ERICSSON GF 788	equal
42	19	82	40	76	80	70	MOTOROLA StarTAC 70	
59	31	70	60	72	80	69	ERICSSON GA 628	equal
118	31	74	60	68	80	69	NOKIA 1610 Plus	
39	19	78	40	78	60	67	ERICSSON GH 688	
31	16	74	40	68	80	64	NOKIA 9000 Communicator	

between calls. We switched the phone off for the remaining 14 hours. This test gives more meaningful and realistic results than the 'maximum talk time' that's often quoted.

Standby time and time in use depend not only on the battery's capacity, but also on a number of other factors:

■ **Phone software:** The software that controls the phone also influences the battery's performance. The same battery used in a phone with less 'intelligent' software may not last as long.

■ **Network conditions:** If you switch on your mobile phone, it needs to keep in contact with the strongest available base station signal. The weaker the signal, the more power the phone will use. So the same tests carried out in different locations could give different results.

■ **SIM card:** In our tests we used modern 'Phase 2' cards, which provide better battery management than Phase 1 cards, and other benefits — for example, more memory for storing phone numbers and names. Make sure you get a Phase 2 SIM card when you subscribe to a call plan.

■ Also, manufacturers frequently change the specifications of batteries for their phones, and some of the batteries supplied with the phones in Australia are different from those tested in Europe. For these reasons we haven't included battery performance in our overall score.

When you buy a mobile phone, check the battery options available and remember that, in general, the higher the capacity in mAh, the longer the battery will last.

8 Intelligibility and sound quality score

For both incoming and outgoing calls a user panel assessed:

- Intelligibility of words under normal conditions.
- Intelligibility of words with surrounding noise.
- Sound quality (for example, how natural the sound was; how easy it was to recognise somebody's voice; whether there was any echo).

9 Sensitivity score

In 30 locations with weak network conditions both the sender and the receiver assessed the sound quality of outgoing and incoming calls.

10 Ease of use score

Our user panel assessed:

- Instruction manual (for example, thoroughness, structure and accuracy).
- Ease of storing numbers in memory.
- Daily use (for example, shape, size and spacing of keys, receiving and making calls, and handling of the phone).
- Ease of carrying the phone in a pocket or handbag.
- Quality of the display (for example, size, contrast and clarity).
- Ease of receiving messages ('short message service').

The mobile phones in this test were generally small and light and would easily fit into a pocket or handbag.

11 Tumble test score

We put the phones in a barrel with a diameter of 80 cm. We turned the barrel five times per minute for five minutes, to simulate 50 falls from, say, a table or out of a shirt pocket. This is a fairly severe test. The phones were checked for damage after every five turns. While some phones were slightly damaged, all were still usable.

12 Overall score

The overall score combines intelligibility/sound quality, sensitivity, tumble test and ease of use, weighted as follows:

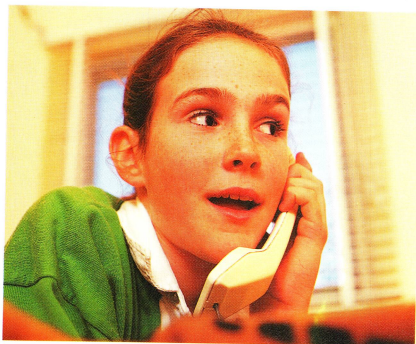
- Intelligibility/sound quality: 35%.
- Sensitivity: 25%.
- Ease of use: 30%.
- Tumble test: 10%.





Mobile phones: how safe is 'safe'?

One of the hot debates in telecommunications is whether there are adverse health effects from mobile phones: if you're connected, could you be affected?



IN BRIEF

■ The jury is still out on the relationship between mobile phones and potential health effects, and probably will be for a long time. In the meantime, if you'd rather be safe than sorry, use a normal phone instead of a mobile whenever you can — and make sure your children do too.

AUSTRALIANS LOVE MOBILES. WE have one of the highest ownership rates in the world on a per capita basis. But as we reap the benefits of convenience, personal security and greater accessibility, is there a price to pay regarding our health? We can't answer that question because there's no definitive answer yet, but this article explains the concerns and gives tips on what you can do if you're worried.

Tuning in to radio frequency

Mobile phones emit radio-frequency radiation (RFR), which is one type of electromagnetic radiation (EMR) — so-called because, like light, the waves in which it travels are made up of both electric and magnetic fields.

The sources of RFR to which we are exposed are very varied, and operate in different frequency ranges. Frequency is the rate at which the electromagnetic field cycles, and is measured in hertz (Hz — cycles per second). One Megahertz (MHz) is equal to one million hertz. Power lines use a frequency of 50 Hz; broadcasting for FM radio around

100 MHz, for TV around 500 MHz; mobile phones from 850 MHz to 915 MHz; and microwave ovens at 2450 MHz. Potential health concerns have been raised about the RFR of some frequencies, including those used for mobile phones.

What could the risk be?

The possible health risks of RFR fall into two categories: thermal and non-thermal. Thermal effects occur when sufficient RFR is absorbed to be converted into heat, causing a rise in tissue temperature. Non-thermal effects, which remain highly disputed at this stage, are suggested to occur with lower-level exposure and to involve changes to complex biological molecules and body cells.

The general consensus is that mobile phone users are not at risk of thermal effects, as the power output of the phones is not high enough to cause a significant temperature rise (more than 1°C). The debate is now centred on the possibility of non-thermal effects.

The Australian radio-frequency radiation exposure standard sets limits on the amount of RFR that can be produced from mobiles and other sources. The standard acknowledges the thermal effects of RFR and the possibility of non-thermal ones, and includes a safety margin in the limit it sets. The standard is currently under review, and some think it should be made more stringent.

What's the evidence?

- Under experimental conditions, some researchers have observed non-thermal effects on cells (not whole organisms) exposed to RFR at mobile phone frequencies, including changes in DNA synthesis, cell function and gene regulation, among others.
- A recent Adelaide Hospital study exposed mice (specially bred to be prone to develop cancer) to radiation at mobile phone frequencies for a total of one hour a day over 18 months. Of the exposed mice, 43% developed cancer (lymphoma), compared to 22% of the unexposed mice.

Predictably, the study has drawn different interpretations from both sides of the controversy. On the one hand, "Cellular phone radiation is almost

certainly implicated in the promotion of cancers" (Senator Lyn Allison, Democrat Spokesperson on Communications). On the other, "The most one can say at this stage is that if there are mice in the community who are genetically predisposed to developing lymphoma, they would be well advised not to use mobile phones" (Senator Richard Alston, Minister of Communications and the Arts).

There is consensus among experts that RFR from mobiles probably doesn't directly *cause* cancer. However, there's concern that it may act as a cancer 'promoter'.

The jury is still out

Issuing a definitive verdict on the long-term safety of RFR in general, and of mobile phones in particular, will remain difficult. There are many reasons for this. For example, the amount of radiation absorbed can vary tremendously and depends on variables such as frequency and the size of the person. The role of other environmental factors, including background RFR, is also unclear.

However, mobile phones position the source of radiation (the antenna) close to your head. This means the RFR may concentrate locally or cause localised energy 'hot spots' in the head. In the US several cases are being brought against mobile phone manufacturers on the basis that users have developed brain tumours they claim were caused by radiation from their phone. Naturally enough, mobile phone manufacturers dispute these claims.

Carrying your mobile hooked onto your belt is also an issue, as mobiles generate some radiation even in standby mode. It's the areas of your body nearest the phone which are at greatest potential risk.

While some published scientific studies show evidence of potential risk, other studies show no effect. Phone manufacturer Motorola, for example, asserts that, "Much of the data from studies on non-thermal effects is inconsistent, and lacks replication by independent groups."

Evidence incomplete

So where does this leave the consumer? There is some evidence of an *association* between adverse health effects and mobile phones, but not of *causation* — in other words, no cause and effect relationship has been established. Thus there's a high level of scientific uncertainty. Much therefore comes down to where you think the emphasis should lie: does the available evidence amount to 'incomplete evidence of risk' or 'incomplete evidence of safety'?

A \$4.5 million research program has been announced by the Federal Government. The World Health Organization, the European Commission and the US government are also conducting studies,

Do 'shielding' devices work?

There are a number of so-called phone 'shielding' devices that claim to provide protection from radiation for mobile users. The effectiveness of these products is still very much on trial. There is no Australian standard to cover these devices, and no reputable Australian tests have been carried out. And if such devices do shield radiation, they may affect the performance of your phone.

Until there is independent evidence that shielding devices really work, CHOICE recommends saving your money and instead following the tips in *What can users do?*, below.

but the results won't be available for a few years. To be certain of achieving the goal of protecting people's health, the research needs to deliver independent and objective investigation of all evidence. Unfortunately, given the value of the booming mobile phone market, neither side in the debate is likely to be satisfied that this will be done.

What can users do?

In the meantime, if you're at all concerned, here are some precautions mobile phone users can take, for little or no cost:

- Use a regular phone whenever possible. Limit the number and duration of your mobile calls, and particularly your children's (children may be more sensitive to RFR).
- If you can, hold the phone a little away from your head. It's the 'near field' (3 to 4 cm) that presents the greatest potential risk.
- Minimise your use of a mobile phone in enclosed spaces, where it's likely to have to transmit at a higher power level (digital phones vary their power output as required).
- Consider investing in a hands-free kit, and avoid carrying the phone at your waist. There are hands-free kits you can use both inside and outside the car, with an earpiece and a clip-on microphone. □

They're everywhere — but the jury is still out on whether using a mobile phone could be associated with any health problems.



TEST REPORT

Australian cooking has come a long way from the meat and three veg days, and stoves are changing to keep pace with culinary trends. All the rage these days are wok burners — large, high-heat gas burners ideal for stir-frying.



Cooking with gas

IN BRIEF

- We tested gas cooktops with a wok burner, which is designed to hold a wok stable and secure while delivering fast, high heat ideal for stir-frying.
- The wok burners with the highest heat output produced the best stir-fries.
- Some of the stoves we tested come with automatic re-ignition or gas cut-out, designed to prevent accidents if the flame goes out — see note 2, page 37.

IF YOU'RE BUYING A NEW STOVE — whether it's because your old one's past its best or you're remodelling your kitchen — you're ideally placed to take advantage of recent innovations in cooktop design and technology.

First things first

While a separate oven and cooktop are more expensive than an all-in-one range, they give you more flexibility of kitchen design and heat source — for example, a gas cooktop with an electric oven is a popular choice.

So if you've decided to go for a separate cooktop, your next decision is between gas and electricity. While most Australians use electric stoves, gas is becoming increasingly popular. It's fast and you have instant control over the heat. It's also cheaper and less harmful to the environment in most areas than cooking with electricity (see *Environmental issues*, page 36).

Mains gas is available in most Australian state capitals, but getting connected will add to the cost of the cooktop if you aren't already. All the cooktops in the test can also be used with bottled gas — the supplier just installs different nozzles and makes some adjustments.

What's new?

The fact that the biggest-selling gas cooktops these days come with a special wok burner is evidence of a dramatic shift in Australian eating patterns. Thanks to the influence of multiculturalism and an increased awareness of the benefits of quick, simple and nutritious meals, stir-fries are now becoming a significant part of our diet.

The design of woks is ideal for stir-frying, and the wok burners on the cooktops we tested hold the traditional round-based wok stable and deliver lots of heat.

Cooking with a wok burner

We tested 10 cooktops, each approximately 60 cm wide (the most popular size), with three standard burners and a wok burner. The cooktops all cost under \$1000.

They all cooked well, were straightforward to use and passed our gas consumption/efficiency and safety tests, although there were some technical problems — see right.

And the wok burners? Those with the highest heat output — the AEG, BLANCO and WHIRLPOOL — produced the best stir-fries. The meat was moist and dark (but unburnt) and the vegetables bright

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

and crisp. When you're stir-frying, continuous high temperatures, like these cooktops produced, are needed so that food is cooked quickly for optimum flavour, colour and texture. If the sizzle is lost during cooking, the food can become bland, watery and tough as it stews.

But what if you're not wok cooking — can you use the wok burner for other pots and pans? As the wok burner occupies prime position on the hob (the front left corner on the cooktops we tested) it might be tempting to use it for pans other than woks — a large frypan, for instance.

Theoretically you can do this, although manufacturers recommend that you don't. Use only a large pan, make sure it's stable on the pan support (you may have to remove the wok trivet) and keep the flames low so they don't lick up the sides.

Our tests with a 30 cm frypan showed that if you have the heat too high, flames could reach the handle mount and even the rim of the frypan, potentially causing burns or igniting any oil (or your sleeves).

If you don't think you'll be using the wok burner for wok cooking very often, you may be better off with a regular cooktop.

WHAT TO BUY

SIMPSON 72B315	BEST BUY	\$519
SMEG SAR134		\$679
WHIRLPOOL 6WOKGC		\$499
AEG 32590G		\$749
WESTINGHOUSE GHF17		\$579
ILVE IV360C		\$844

While the AEG and WHIRLPOOL made it into the *What to buy* list, it was largely on the strength of their excellent cooking scores — their ease of use scores weren't as good as the others. Check the profiles on pages 34 and 35 to see whether you think you'd be interested in them.

Technical problems

Three of the cooktops — the **FISHER & PAYKEL**, **SIMPSON** and **WESTINGHOUSE** — initially failed the gas consumption rating tests for the wok burners. When we contacted the manufacturers, we found they had been fitted with incorrect gas injector nozzles or jets — all were too small. They all passed when the correct nozzles were fitted.

This concerns us because the average consumer wouldn't realise there was a technical problem, but might be disappointed with the performance of their wok burner.

The manufacturers said they will investigate the incidents and introduce measures to ensure it doesn't happen again.

When buying a gas cooktop:

■ **Size and shape:** Cooktops come in a variety of sizes, shapes and layouts. The cooktops we tested were approximately 60 cm wide and slightly less deep, with the control knobs at the side. You can also get models with the controls at the front, and wider models which typically offer either four burners with more space between them, or five burners.

Multi-combination units allow you to put your own choice of burners and other units (such as a deep-fat fryer or grill) together.

■ **Standard burners:** Gas burners are rated in megajoules per hour (MJ/h), which represents the amount of energy they use on their maximum setting. Four-burner cooktops should have a good range of heat ratings, from slow (low heat — around 3.5 to 5 MJ/h) to fast (high heat — up to 10 or 11 MJ/h). Burner sizes vary from around 4 cm to 7 cm.

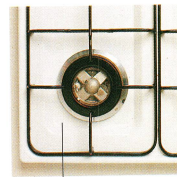
■ **Wok burners:** Most of the wok burners we tested have two rings of flame; the **CHEF** and **SMEG** have three. However, the number of rings didn't make any difference to performance. The **CHEF** also has separate controls for the outer and inner rings.

■ **Specialist burners:** Those available include rectangular burners, sometimes called 'fish burners', designed for large

Continued overleaf

Depressions on the hob surface help contain spills, while the burner and collar can be removed for easy cleaning.

Smooth edges that don't trap dirt



This wok trivet holds the wok steady, and also allows you to use other pans.

Rubber feet stop pan supports slipping on the hob.

Knobs come off for easy cleaning.



Clear labelling on controls, and the knob crossbar is easy to grip

Flame-failure safety feature



PROFILES

The gas cooktops profiled are those in the *What to buy* list. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in November 1997. Anything lower is a bargain.

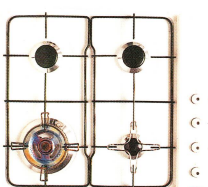


SIMPSON 728315

Target price: \$519

Good points

- Very good score for all cooking tests.
 - The normal burners have three different heat ratings; the wok burner has a reasonably high heat output, which contributed to its very good score for stir-fries.
 - The knobs are large and easy to use, and the markings are clear and easy to understand.
 - Spills are contained and the hob is easy to clean.
 - Automatic gas cut-out if the flame goes out.
- #### Bad points
- You can't feel when the knobs have reached their high setting — they don't 'click' into place.

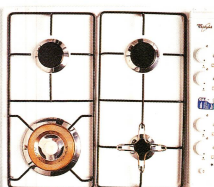


SMEG SAR134

Target price: \$679

Good points

- Cooked rice and white sauce very well, but wasn't as good for stir-fries as some of the others in the *What to buy* list.
 - The knobs are easy to use.
 - Small spills can be contained around each burner.
 - Easy to light.
- #### Bad points
- The regular burners have only two different heat ratings, and the highest-rating burner is relatively low.
 - Dirt traps under the control panel make cleaning difficult.



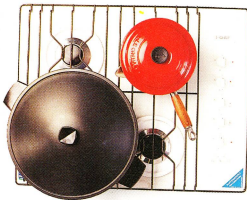
WHIRLPOOL 6WOKGC

Target price: \$499

Good points

- The wok burner has a high heat output, which contributed to its excellent score for stir-frying.
 - Very good cooking score for boiled rice and white sauce.
 - Easy to light.
- #### Bad points
- The knobs can be difficult to grip and your finger could get caught between the barrier and knob when you're turning them.
 - The regular burners have only two different heat ratings.
 - There are large gaps under the control panel where dirt can accumulate.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR, *continued*



If you buy a cooktop with a wok burner, check that the layout gives you enough room when using a wok still to fit three other pans.

rectangular pans. You can also find cooktops with a mixture of gas and electric burners.

- **Controls:** Look for control knobs that are a good size, ideally with a crossbar so they're easy to grip, and a clear pointer. They should be easily accessible, and preferably towards the front. The symbols and markings should be easy to read and understand.
 - **Ignition:** The days of using matches to light the gas burner — along with the hairs on your fingers — are pretty much a thing of the past.
- All the cooktops we tested have a mains-powered electronic ignition system, so they need to be connected to the electricity supply. When the

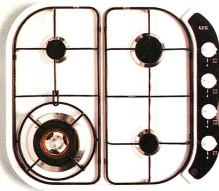
ignition trigger is activated, a spark is generated at all burners, but only the one with gas flowing will ignite. If there's a power cut, they can also be lit with matches.

Other variations include models with battery-powered electronic ignition, and piezo ignition (generally more common on grillers and ovens), which generates its own spark mechanically.

If you get battery-powered ignition, make sure you can access the battery compartment easily and that replacement batteries are readily available. With any electronic ignition system, make sure you can light the stove manually if there is a power cut or some other electrical failure.

- **Safety:** Knobs that have to be pushed down before they can be turned mean you won't accidentally knock them on while cleaning, and make it harder for children to operate them.

If the flame goes out while the gas is turned on, gas can escape into the room. Some stoves have a flame-failure feature for this reason (see note 2, page 37) — either the gas



AEG 32590G

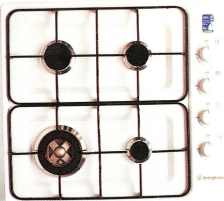
Target price: \$749

Good points

- Best cooking score.
- The normal burners have three different heat ratings; the wok burner has a high heat output, which contributed to its excellent score for stir-fries.
- The knobs are large and easy to grip.
- The hob has a ridge in the middle to contain spills.
- The pan supports have rubber feet to lessen slipping and wobbling.
- Comes with a three-year warranty.

Bad points

- The rubber-capped ignition button is hard to press and isn't easy to see against the black background.
- The removable wok trivet slips around on the hob.
- There are large gaps under the control panel where dirt can accumulate.
- You can't easily identify the burner that will give you the lowest heat.



WESTINGHOUSE GHF17

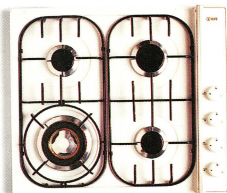
Target price: \$579

Good points

- The normal burners have three different heat ratings; the wok burner has a reasonably high heat output, which contributed to its very good score for stir-fries.
- Cooked white sauce very well.
- The knobs are large and easy to use, and the markings clear and meaningful.
- Spills are contained and the hob is easy to clean.
- Automatic gas cut-out if the flame goes out.

Bad points

- Only an "OK" score for cooking rice — it boiled quickly, but when we turned the flame to its lowest setting for simmering, the heat was still too high.
- You can't feel when the knobs have reached their high setting — they don't 'click' into place.



ILVE IV360C

Target price: \$844

Good points

- Cooked rice and white sauce very well, but wasn't quite as good for stir-fries as others in the *What to buy* list.
- Spills are contained and the hob is easy to clean.
- The pan supports have rubber feet to reduce slipping and wobbling.

Bad points

- The normal burners have only two different heat ratings, although the range is reasonable.
- The knobs can be slippery to grip.

automatically cuts out or the stove automatically re-ignites.

- The **pan supports** should be flat and stable on the hob. Those with rubber feet are less likely to move about than those without, and don't scratch the hob surface. When you're in the shop, see how much movement — up and down and side to side — you get from pan supports and trivets.

- Stovetops are very susceptible to food spills, slops and splatters, so it's important that they're easy to clean:

— **Hob surface:** A good cooktop should effectively contain reasonable spillage. Look for rounded depressions around each burner, a sunken hob surface and/or ridges which partition the hob to minimise the spread of any mess. The surfaces should be easy to wipe clean, without dirt traps such as joins and gaps.

— **Pan supports:** The pan supports and any trivets (smaller pot stands, such as for the wok or a coffee pot) should be easy to remove and washable in the kitchen sink. The **CHEF** has one large support that doesn't fit in a domestic kitchen sink. However, it's easy to slide pots between burners on it.

— **Knobs, burners and burner collars** should be easy to remove for cleaning underneath.

Where the rest went wrong

- Although the **BOSCH** scored very well for cooking, its overall score was brought down because it wasn't easy to ignite, the hob wasn't well designed to contain spills, and the pan supports slipped on it. The control knob for the large burner was dangerously close to the burner itself.

- The **FISHER & PAYKEL** lost points because it was difficult to ignite, and the hob surface was shallow and not well designed to contain spills.

- While the **BLANCO** scored well for cooking the stir-fry and white sauce, the lowest heat setting was too high for the rice and overcooked it. It was also difficult to tell which burner to use for simmering.

- The **CHEF** also scored poorly when cooking rice, with its lowest heat setting too high. The hob surface was difficult to clean, and the pan support awkward to handle and clean.

Woks

CHOICE is currently testing flat-bottomed woks that don't need special supports or burners, so keep an eye out for our report with the test results and more information about woks, which we'll be publishing in the near future.

See page 12 for our test of 2 L saucepans.

Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Target price* (\$)	Warranty (years)	Dimensions, width x depth (mm)	Ignition method	Flame failure
SIMPSON 72B315	Email	Australia	519	1	600 x 535	Press, twist, hold, release	Gas cut-out
SMEG SAR134	Omega	Italy	679	2	585 x 500	Press, twist, release	
WHIRLPOOL 6WOKGC	Whirlpool	Italy	499	2	580 x 500	Ignition button	
AEG 32590G	Andi Co	Italy	749	3	580 x 500	Ignition button	
WESTINGHOUSE GHF17	Email	Australia	579	1	600 x 535	Press, twist, hold, release	Gas cut-out
ILVE IV360C	Euroilux	Italy	844	2	580 x 500	Press, twist, release	
BOSCH NGT612KAU	Robert Bosch	Italy	509	(A)	580 x 500	Twist, press, hold, release	Gas cut-out
FISHER & PAYKEL GC600WF	Fisher & Paykel	NZ	599	1	580 x 510	Press, twist, hold, release	Gas cut-out
BLANCO GWS4400	Major Electrical Appliances	Italy	649	1	580 x 500	Ignition button	
CHEF GH11SKGW	Southcorp	Australia	799	1	670 x 535 (B)	Press, twist, release	Re-ignition

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in November 1997.

(A) Not stated, but the distributor says two years.

(B) These are the pan support dimensions, as it fits outside the actual cooktop (which is 660 x 525 mm).

(C) The Chef wok burner has separate controls for the inner and outer rings of flame. The inner ring is rated at 3 MJ/h, the outer at 11.5 MJ/h.

For people with disabilities

Look for markings with good colour contrast — black-on-white (Fisher & Paykel and Whirlpool) is good. The other cooktops have markings in such combinations as grey-on-white, green-on-black and red-on-black, which are more difficult to distinguish.

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre assessed the cooktops to determine what features you should look for when buying a cooktop, if you have certain disabilities.

- Knobs with a crossbar are easier to grip and turn than smooth round knobs.
- Symbols and markings for the controls should be clear and easily understood. As well as burner location, the **CHEF** labels their purpose: simmer, medium, high, and the wok rings — the only cooktop to do so.
- Controls with fixed settings that click into position — the **SIMPSON** and **WESTINGHOUSE** are the only ones that don't do this at the high setting.
- Controls near the front of the cooktop — **FISHER & PAYKEL**, **ILVE** and **SMEG**.

PAYKEL, ILVE and SMEG.

Look for easy-to-clean surfaces, with indents and barriers to contain spills and few gaps and crevices where dirt can accumulate. The **WESTINGHOUSE, ILVE, SIMPSON** and **SMEG** were judged easiest to clean. The **CHEF**'s pan support is heavy, large and awkward to handle when cleaning, but there were other tops with worse dirt traps.

Ignition systems that require you to hold down the knob for some time are not recommended, as they need some force to

operate. The **AEG** and **BLANCO** ignition buttons were considered difficult to press. The **WHIRLPOOL** was the easiest to ignite.

Safety features such as gas cut-out or automatic re-ignition may be worth considering.

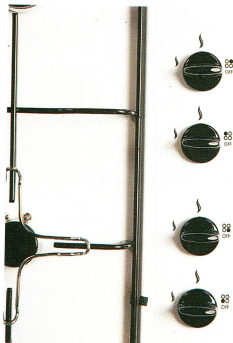
Unfortunately, no individual cooktop was perfect on all counts — decide which features are important to you, and choose the model which best meets your needs.

Environmental issues

Unless your electricity is generated by non-polluting, renewable energy (such as Tasmania's hydropower), you'll be contributing around three times as much carbon dioxide — a greenhouse gas — to the atmosphere by using electricity rather than gas to cook.

Up to two-thirds of the energy contained in coal is lost in electricity production (through conversion at the power plant, then in transport to your home). While there are some energy losses in the transport of natural gas, virtually all of its energy is available when it's burnt in your home. So to produce the same amount of heat, gas uses less fuel and so much less CO₂ is produced.

However, indoor air pollution is also an issue. Burning natural gas gives off nitrogen dioxide, a contributor to respiratory problems, especially in children. Although the amounts involved with gas cooking are small compared with, say, gas heating or sources of outdoor air pollution, you should always have the room well ventilated when cooking, and have a rangehood or exhaust fan that's vented to the outside if possible.



3

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Job finish	Wok burner rating (MJ/h)	Normal burner ratings (MJ/h)	Cooking score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
namel, white	15.4	10.8 / 7.2 / 4.7	92	81	87	SIMPSON 72B315
namel, white	12	5.9 / 5.9 / 4.8	88	78	84	SMEG SAR134
namel, white	16	7.2 / 7.2 / 3.6	94	61	81	WHIRLPOOL 6WOKGC
namel, white	16.6	10.6 / 5.3 / 3.8	98	53	80	AEG 32590G
namel, white	15.4	10.8 / 7.2 / 4.7	82	77	80	WESTINGHOUSE GHF17
namel, white	13.8	10.0 / 5.1 / 5.1	84	70	79	ILVE IV360C
namel, white	16	7.2 / 7.2 / 3.6	86	54	73	BOSCH NGT612KAU
namel, white	15	6.1 / 6.1 / 3.7	80	61	72	FISHER & PAYKEL GC600WF
namel, white	16.6	10.6 / 5.3 / 3.8	78	57	70	BLANCO GWS4400
lass, white	14.5 (c)	11.1 / 6.5 / 5.5	74	57	67	CHEF GH11SKGW

equal

1 Ignition method

■ **Press, twist, release** means simply pressing and turning the knob to the high flame setting.

■ **Press, twist, hold, release** is similar, but you have to hold the knob down for a further 10 seconds or so before releasing it. Some people might find this tedious; others may like it as a safety feature if children are about.

■ Other models require you to press an **ignition button** after turning the knob.

See *What to look for* on page 34 for more about ignition systems.

2 Flame-failure action

Some stoves have flame-failure safety features which automatically activate if the flame is accidentally extinguished:

■ **Gas cut-out** — the gas stops flowing if there's no flame.

■ **Re-ignition** — the ignition sparks constantly until the burner is relit or you turn it off.

3 Wok burner rating (MJ/h)

The higher the rating, the better the cooktop was at cooking stir-fries, which need fast, high heat.

4 Normal burner ratings (MJ/h)

You want a good range of heat ratings ('output' in MJ/h) to give cooking control from very low (slow) to very high (fast) heat. Some of the models in the test (including the **ILVE**, **SMEG** and **WHIRLPOOL** in the *What to buy* list) have a limited heat range and/or limited number of ratings.

5 Cooking score

We did three different cooking tests to see how well the cooktops performed over a range of cooking methods:

■ **Rice** — to assess the range of heat settings on the smallest burner. Rice was brought to the boil and then maintained on a low simmer for a set period of time.

■ **White sauce** — to demonstrate the smallest burner's evenness when simmering for a long time.

■ **Stir-fry** — to demonstrate the ability of the wok burner to deliver continuous high heat.

Each test was weighted equally to give the overall cooking score.

6 Ease of use score

To determine ease of use, we looked at:

■ **The cooking area** — it should be easy to clean, contain spills effectively and have stable pan supports (50% of ease of use score).

■ **Controls** — they should be well-spaced, easy

to grip and turn, and clearly marked (20% of ease of use score).

■ **Ignition** — how easy and safe it is to light the burners (20% of ease of use score).

■ **Instructions** — they should be clear, well-illustrated, correct and complete, with adequate information on installation, use and maintenance (10% of ease of use score).

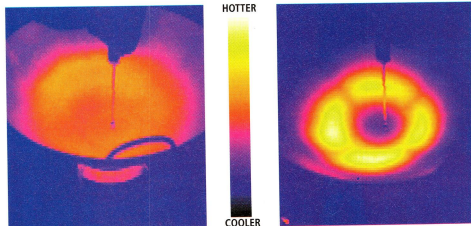
None of the instructions we had was great. They all covered more than one model, which was sometimes confusing as they didn't explain how to distinguish which model is yours or which sections apply to your model.

7 Overall score

The overall score was calculated as follows:

■ Cooking score (60%).

■ Ease of use score (40%).



We used a special thermal imaging camera to photograph a round-based wok on a wok burner and on a regular burner to see if there were any differences. The images show that the wok on the wok burner (left) has heat evenly distributed around the bottom and sides of the pan. The wok on the regular burner (right) has its heat concentrated where the flames touch the pan, while the bottom is relatively cooler. You can also see the cooler spots where the wok rests on the pan supports.

The colour scales were different for each wok so you can't directly compare them on this basis. For instance, the yellow/orange on the left represents a cooler temperature than the same colour on the right.



Doing well by doing good

Want to see a good return on your money but not at the expense of someone's quality of life? You could consider ethical

IN BRIEF

■ You can make a profit on your investments and satisfy your conscience at the same time — but don't forget the normal rules of sensible investment: balance your desire for profit with a level of risk you're comfortable with.

■ You'll need to define what your ethical priorities are — different investments target different areas, such as environment-friendly production, or avoid profiting from armaments, alcohol, child labour, etc.

investment.

IF YOU FOUND OUT YOUR INVESTMENT or superannuation funds were being ploughed into armaments production, highly polluting manufacturing or companies that use child labour, your concern might outweigh the profit motive.

The return on your money may be high, but so is the social and environmental cost. If you'd prefer your money not to harm the environment or anyone's quality of life, ethical investment may be a good alternative to traditional, 'non-screened' investment.

What's ethical investment?

Ethical investment can direct your money towards businesses with a social conscience, giving this consideration anything from a mild to a very strong priority. The term 'ethical' is usually used to describe businesses that more actively try to improve a small community or society at large than others.

For this reason, many ethical investment trusts exclude companies that profit from military equipment, nuclear power, alcohol, gambling and tobacco.

The way a company deals with labour relations, taxation, energy conservation and indigenous people is also of concern to ethical investors.

You can put your money into ethical investments in a variety of ways, including listed and unlisted shares, unit trusts, insurance and friendly society bonds, super funds and community-based funds (see the table for examples).



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Will I still make money?

Ethical investors are no different from most people in wanting the best return their investment can buy.

The Australian market is much smaller than the US or UK markets, with fewer ethically motivated companies available. As one managing director of an ethical financial advisory firm said: "It can be argued that less choice will mean less possibility of choosing well-performing stocks, and hence less return."

He added, however, that a comparison of six ethical companies with six of Australia's largest listed companies over the 12 months to March 1997 showed the ethical companies' shares had outperformed the conventional companies by around 12.5% in capital growth. (The conventional companies were chosen on the basis of their size, without reference to ethical considerations, while the alternative portfolio was selected on the basis of the shares an ethical investor might typically pick, including alternative energy development and metal recycling.)

The Hunter Hall Value Growth Trust is another example of there not having to be a cost to investing ethically — out of all the industrial share trusts on the Australian market, it topped the list in the year to September 19, 1997, with an incredible return of 63%.

While this sounds rosy, it's not the whole story. Both these examples show short-term performance, which can't be guaranteed to continue and isn't enough to judge an investment on alone. They're both also positive examples — we could pick different companies and show a negative result for ethical investment. But they do show ethical investment doesn't just have to be about absolving your conscience — returns may also be quite healthy.

Continued on page 40

Examples of ethical investments

This table is a brief guide to the kinds of 'ethical' investments available. Some investments may adhere more strictly to conventional ethical considerations than others — check the details with your financial adviser.

Company name	Manager	Investment criteria	Return for 1 year to 30/6/97 (%)	Return for 3 years to 30/6/97 (%) (pa)
UNLISTED SHARES				
EARTH SANCTUARIES	Earth Sanctuaries	(A) + Ensure survival of Australian native flora and fauna within a commercial environment	14.50	16.00
AUSTRALIAN ETHICAL INVESTMENT	Australian Ethical Investment	(A) + Energy conservation, recycling, health promotion, education, wildlife protection	6.15	22.50
UNIT TRUSTS				
AUSTRALIAN ETHICAL Equities Trust	Australian Ethical Investment	(A) + Energy conservation, recycling, health promotion, education, wildlife protection	14.31	11.01
AUSTRALIAN ETHICAL INVESTMENT Trust	Australian Ethical Investment	(A) + Energy conservation, recycling, health promotion, education, wildlife protection	10.22	7.13
EQUITILINK Greenlink Trust	Equitilink Australia	(A) + Good medium growth from an environmental perspective	8.80	na
ETHICAL Balanced Investment Trust	Tyndall Australia	Adheres to YWCA Australia ethical policy code of promoting social justice, equality and peace	21.75	9.09
HUNTER HALL Value Growth Trust	Hunter Hall Investment Management	Significantly outperform the All Ordinaries Index while adhering to (A)	53.50	25.10
FRIENDLY SOCIETIES AND SUPER BONDS				
ANA Ethical Superannuation Fund & Friendly Society Bond	ANA Friendly Society	(A) + Housing co-ops, health and welfare, preserve natural assets	4.25	na
SUPERANNUATION MASTER FUNDS				
FREEDOM OF CHOICE Master Fund	Freedom of Choice	Includes investment in Australian Ethical Investment/Equities Trust	(B)	(B)
LIFETIME Asset Management Program	Super Funds Management	Includes investment in Australian Ethical Investment/Equities Trust	10.77	na
CREDIT UNION Super Fund	Trust Company of Australia	As above for Freedom of Choice, and for Maleny and District Credit Union below	(B)	(B)
ANA Ethical Super Fund	ANA Friendly Society	(A) + Housing co-ops, health and welfare, preservation of natural assets	7.5	na
COMMUNITY-BASED FUNDS				
COMMUNITY AID ABROAD Ethical Investment Trust	Community Aid Abroad	(A) + Investments which are socially or environmentally beneficial	up to 5 (B)	up to 5 (B)
FITZROY & CARLETON COMMUNITY CREDIT CO-OPERATIVE	Fitzroy & Carleton Community Credit Co-operative	Personal loans at low interest rates	up to 3.25 (B)	na
MACAULAY COMMUNITY CREDIT CO-OPERATIVE	Macauley Community Credit Co-operative	Personal loans at low interest rates	up to 5 (B)	na
MALENY AND DISTRICT COMMUNITY CREDIT UNION	Maleny and District Community Credit Union	Investments which are socially just and environmentally responsible	up to 5.75 (B)	na
CHURCH-BASED FUNDS				
CATHOLIC DEVELOPMENT FUND	Catholic Development Fund	Loans to parishes for capital works	up to 5 (B)	na
THE UNITING CHURCH INVESTMENT SERVICES (QLD)	The Uniting Church Investment Services	Bank bills, property, fixed-interest, ethical shares	up to 6.1 (B)	na

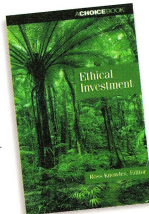
Returns shown above are net of all fees and costs.
na Not available.

(A) Avoids gambling, tobacco, alcohol, uranium, environmental degradation, armaments and social injustice; has a proportion of socially/environmentally positive investments.

(B) Returns depend on investments chosen.
Reprinted from the CHOICE Book *Ethical Investment*.



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Want to know more?

More information can be found in CHOICE Books' recently released *Ethical Investment*, edited by ethical financial adviser Ross Knowles. This book provides a listing of investments and a directory of financial advisers throughout Australia who claim to give advice on ethical investing. See page 22 for the order form.



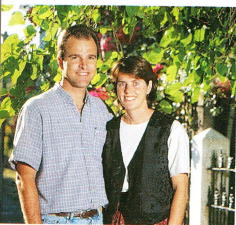
Choosing your ethical criteria

Not all ethical trusts follow similar criteria — it depends on *your* ethical preferences which investments you'd go into and which you'd avoid.

For example, you may be more concerned than other people about excluding alcohol from your investment portfolio. In this case, you'd probably avoid Coles Myer because it owns the national alcohol retailer Liquorland. Others might see Coles Myer as a positive investment, as it's the largest private employer of young people and women in the country.

It can be quite difficult knowing how far down the ethical line you want to travel. It's fairly clear that no ethical fund would invest in arms manufacture, for example. But there are some overseas funds that don't invest, for example, in glass companies that manufacture drinking bottles specifically for the military. Others would be content to invest in those glass companies. But what about the supplier of the sand that manufacturer uses to make the bottles?

INVESTOR PROFILE



Before heading off to Paraguay to work on an economic development program six years ago, Trevor and Judy Thomas cashed in their superannuation and looked around for somewhere to invest it.

They both wanted to see a return on their money without compromising their values. Up till then, the couple had only stored savings in bank accounts and term deposits and were unsure how this money was being used. So they visited a financial planner, who suggested they try investing 'ethically'.

This advice has seen them earn a healthy 20% per annum on their capital since they've

been away. Returning to Australia last year, Trevor says he's "very pleased" with their investment portfolio's performance, with the added satisfaction of knowing it's not damaging people's lives or the planet.

Half of the Thomases' money was invested in a finance company trust which focuses on smaller companies. Trevor believes small companies don't have the same opportunity to damage the environment or community as larger ones.

The couple holds another 15% of their money in the Australian Ethical Investment Trust (see the table on page 39 for more about it).

The trust has about one-third of its investment in shares it views as ethically based and managed, around 16% in property such as solar-powered buildings, and the balance in loans, fixed-interest investments and cash. Its investment loans include projects concerned with recycling, organic produce, energy conservation, housing and health promotion.

The rest of the couple's capital is directly invested in shares they believe to be ethical and they recently adjusted their portfolio weighting to include more property (via three trusts).

"You don't have to be content with lower returns if investing ethically," Trevor says. He and Judy will continue to invest in this way, with the satisfaction that their money is funding positive projects.

Define what's important to you when considering where to invest. A survey by the Australian Ethical Investment Trust of its investors indicated that for many of them the environment was a prime concern. The top 10 issues were:

- Environmental protection.
- Sustainable land use.
- Forest logging/woodchipping.
- Reforestation.
- Energy/resource use efficiency.
- Militarism and armaments.
- Repressive regimes.
- Fair labour/work practices.
- Uranium mining.
- Racism/discrimination.

Financially ethical too?

Of course, while ethically focused trusts and companies may espouse noble aims, they are just as able to go broke as conventional investments.

For example, in 1996 the Federal Court placed the Earth Family Trust in receivership after it found its trustee, Ethical Technology Brokers (ETB), may not have acted in unitholders' interests.

The Australian Securities Commission, which regulates the investment community, also sought to wind up five members of the Peace Shield Ethical group because of concerns over fundraising, issuing shares at a discount, insolvency, and book and record maintenance.

So just because a company may have 'ethical' in its title, there's no guarantee it'll behave as such in a financial sense. Read the prospectus carefully, and check whether it's been registered with the Australian Securities Commission (1300 300 630) as one way of ensuring its legitimacy. See CHOICE, September 1997, for detailed advice on choosing unit trust investments. □



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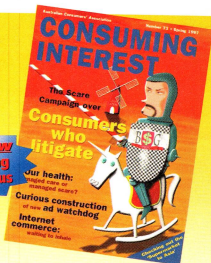
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A good video recorder close to the shallow end of the price range — that's what we went looking for. Here's what we found.



Mid-price VCRs

THE VCR MARKET SPANS A FAIRLY broad price band, from less than \$300 to more than \$800. We set our sights on the lower end of the range and tested a large selection of two- and four-head mono VCRs priced between \$350 and \$400 — the most popular price segment of the market.

While these models don't deliver the sound quality you'd get from a hifi model (and so wouldn't be the best choice for a home theatre system), they'll do everything you'd expect of a VCR. They're not short on features either (see *What to look for*, page 44).

Timer recording

Programming a VCR to record a certain channel at a certain time: it's what you buy a video recorder for, but it's notoriously hard for many people to do. But this time when we assessed the on-screen programming process, we found that, with most models, it's now fairly easy to follow — even if they don't have G-code. For more about G-code, see *What to look for*, page 44.

Easy programming requires clear guidelines in the instruction manual and on-screen. Step-by-step diagrams in the manual are helpful, as are on-screen displays that show the day of the week next to the date you want to record.

However, some models we tested have insufficient diagrams in the manual or — like the SONY — lack on-screen instructions.

If the programming process is something you normally have to wrestle with, look for a VCR that

makes it as easy as possible. The model profiles on page 45 note which ones are particularly easy to program for timer recording.

SP and LP

Many VCRs have both standard play (SP) and long play (LP). LP doubles the amount of recording time on a tape, and although you can lose some picture quality with it, it can be an indispensable feature — say, if you need to record long programs or simply want to fit more on a tape. Also, if you want to play a tape recorded at LP speed, your VCR will need to have LP capability.

We thought it was such an important feature that we included it in our overall score and gave VCRs that don't have it a zero for this factor. This pushed some otherwise good models close to the bottom of the overall rankings — but if most brands can supply LP for this price, why should you put up with a model without it?

WHAT TO BUY

LG T493H	\$359
PHILIPS VR457	\$399
SAMSUNG SV-A90B	\$399
SHARP VC-A460X	\$399
DAEWOO DV-F562P	\$399
NEC VNG-68	\$389
PANASONIC NV-SD270A*	\$399
PHILIPS VR357	\$349
AKAI VS-G456EA	\$399

* While this Panasonic got high scores for picture quality and ease of use, it doesn't have LP capability.

IN BRIEF

■ These VCRs probably won't deliver the level of sound quality produced by a top-end hifi model, but they're definitely not lacking in features or picture quality. For information on hifi VCRs, see CHOICE, May 1997.

■ Finally you no longer need a degree in electronics to program a VCR — most models in this test make it quite easy to do so.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

What would a VCR be without bells and whistles? The 14 models we tested have different assortments of features — some you might consider invaluable, others you'd never use. Here's a guide to help you decide what's important and what's not when you're shopping around.

■ **Remote control:** Check the size and labelling of buttons, and that they're grouped sensibly in terms of their function. Remotes that scored well in our test were also comfortably contoured to the hand.

■ **Number of heads:** Depending on how you plan to use your VCR, it may be worthwhile buying one that has more than two heads. For more details, see *Are four heads better than two?*, page 46.

■ **G-code:** A simple and quick way to record. With some models it's as easy as hitting a special G-code button on the remote and then punching in the multi-digit number that appears in the TV guide — right next to the program you want to record. The number provides your VCR with all programming details: the channel, start time, duration, finish time and date.

■ **Child lock:** Once set, this can stop unwanted program and timer changes.

■ **NTSC:** If you have family or friends who send you tapes in the US NTSC format, you'll need a compatible VCR. The picture quality of NTSC playback may vary, so if it's an important consideration, take the VCR for a test drive with an NTSC tape before you buy.

■ **Remote control compatibility:** Some VCR remotes will also operate your TV (on/off, channel selection, volume, picture settings, etc), even if it's not the same brand.

■ **Auto head clean:** This will clean the heads and drum every time a tape is inserted or ejected.



■ **AV input at the front:** If you want to watch tapes playing in your camcorder via your VCR, having AV inputs at the front (as well as the back) will save you having to turn the VCR around to plug the camcorder in.

The Philips VR457's remote control can light up to make using it in a dark room easier.



■ **SP to LP:** While recording in standard play, the VCR will automatically switch over to long play if the tape is running out.

■ **Picture enhancement:** Improves the quality of the recorded picture during playback.

■ **Index jumping:** The VCR searches for index codes — electronic bookmarks — that are automatically set at the beginning of each recording. The codes can also be added anywhere throughout the tape at your discretion. They allow you to skip from recording to recording. The **SONY SLV-X327AZ** is the only model in our test that doesn't have this feature.

■ **Intro scan:** Using index codes as a guide, intro scan goes to the beginning of a recording, plays the first few seconds of the program, and then goes to the next recording.

■ **Multilingual:** On-screen instructions can be displayed in different languages.

■ **Commercial skip:** When the VCR is playing a tape, you can make it fast forward over short intervals — say 30, 60 or 150 seconds at a time — and then resume playing.

■ **One-touch recording (OTR):** This enables you to set the end time for a program you're in the process of recording (using 30-minute segments). So if you were taping a program but decided to go to bed, you could tell the VCR when to stop recording. Each time you hit the OTR button, the VCR is automatically programmed to record for an additional 30 minutes.

■ **Pre-tuned stations:** Some models may already be tuned to TV stations in the state capital cities.

■ **Back-up time:** In the event that power is interrupted, some models have a power reserve that will keep the clock operating for up to 60 minutes.

PROFILES



LG T493H



Philips VR457



Samsung SV-A90B



Sharp VC-A460X



Daewoo DV-F562P



NEC VNG-68



Panasonic NV-SD270A



Philips VR357



Akai VS-G465EA

Where did the rest go wrong?

■ The **PANASONIC NV-SD220A** and the **SONY SLV-X327AZ** don't have long play, but their scores for video quality and ease of use were good.

■ The **HITACHI VT-M528E** had the lowest score for video quality.

■ The **AKAI VS-G460EA** and the **SHARP VC-A410K** were the worst for ease of use.

The VCRs in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order from top to bottom of each column. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October/November 1997. Anything lower is a bargain. Features mentioned in the profiles are explained in *What to look for*, left.



LG T493H

Target price: \$359

Good points

- Equal best remote control.
- Equal best for ease of use, which includes timer recording.

Bad points

- On-screen programming displays only the date, not the day of week.
- Contrary to the instruction manual, the eject button doesn't operate while the VCR is in child lock mode.



Philips VR457

Target price: \$399

Good points

- Equal best for timer recording.
- Very good still playback and slow-motion pictures.
- Remote control will operate Philips TVs, and even some from other brands.
- Front AV input.
- Main controls on the remote can light up for use in a dark room.

Bad points

- None to mention.



Samsung SV-A90B

Target price: \$399

Good points

- Equal second for ease of use, which includes timer recording.
- Instruction manual has good diagrams of on-screen display menus.

Bad points

- Low score on LP playback test.
- No auto head cleaning.
- The only model in the *What to buy* list that doesn't have pre-tuned TV stations.



Sharp VC-A460X

Target price: \$399

Good points

- Equal second for picture quality.
- Equal best for LP playback.
- While recording in SP, the machine reverts to LP if the tape is running out.
- Remote control will operate Sharp TVs, and even some from other brands.

Bad points

- For on-screen programming, the timer has to be adjusted by changing minutes, not hours. So to change the timer setting from 2 pm to 4 pm, you have to scroll through 120 minutes.



Daewoo DV-F562P

Target price: \$399

Good points

- Equal second for picture quality.
- High-speed rewind.

Bad points

- Doesn't have NTSC capability.
- No auto EHhead cleaning.
- No back-up power for the clock.



NEC VNG-68

Target price: \$389

Good points

- Best instruction manual — it comes with a separate quick-reference manual.

Bad points

- Remote control has small buttons and poor layout.



Panasonic NV-SD270A

Target price: \$399

Good points

- Best for ease of use — good instruction manual.
- Equal easiest for timer recording.

Bad points

- No LP recording facility.
- No one-touch recording.



Philips VR357

Target price: \$349

Good points

- Equal easiest for timer recording.

Bad points

- Poor freeze-frame and slow-motion pictures.



Akai VS-G46SEA

Target price: \$399

Good points

- While recording in SP, the machine reverts to LP if the tape is running out.
- Front AV input.

Bad points

- On-screen record programming only displays the date, not the day of the week.
- Remote control is a bit bulky, and the main function keys aren't very well defined.

MID-PRICE VCRs

	Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Target price (\$) *	Warranty (years)	Dimensions (mm) w x d x h	Video heads	G-code	Child lock system	AV input
	LG T439H	LG	Korea	359	1	359 x 313 x 94	4	✓	✓	✓
equal	PHILIPS VR457	Philips	Malaysia	399	1	360 x 290 x 94	4	✓		✓
	SAMSUNG SV-A90B	Samsung	Indonesia	399	1	379 x 336 x 92	4	✓	✓	✓
	SHARP VC-A460X	Sharp	Malaysia	399	1	360 x 290 x 94	4	✓	✓	
	DAEWOO DV-F562P	Daewoo	Korea	399	1 (A)	360 x 317 x 93	4	✓		
equal	NEC VNG-68	NEC	Korea	389	1	360 x 315 x 94	4	✓		
	PANASONIC NV-SD270A	Panasonic	Malaysia	399	1 (B)	429 x 321 x 88	2	✓		
	PHILIPS VR357	Philips	Malaysia	349	1	360 x 290 x 94	2	✓		
	AKAI VS-G465EA	Akai	China	399	1	378 x 295 x 92	4	✓		✓
	HITACHI VT-M528E	Hitachi	Malaysia	399	1	380 x 300 x 93	2	✓	✓	✓
	PANASONIC NV-SD220A	Panasonic	Malaysia	349	1 (B)	429 x 321 x 88	2	✓		✓
equal	AKAI VS-G460EA	Akai	Indonesia	349	1	379 x 295 x 92	4	✓		✓
	SHARP VC-A410X	Sharp	Malaysia	399	1	360 x 290 x 94	4	✓	✓	
	SONY SLV-X327AZ	Sony	Malaysia	399	1	355 x 305 x 100	2	✓		

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October/November 1997.

(A) The manufacturer has assured us that all VCRs are now covered by a three-year parts and labour warranty.

(B) Optional two-year warranty plan is \$30.

How reliable have subscribers found them?

We asked a group of subscribers whether their VCR had needed repair over the previous 12 months and if they would purchase the same brand again.

The graphs on the right show the results for those brands for which we got sufficient answers (the number in brackets tells you how many readers reported on the brand). Note that the results of the survey also include brands not tested, and that we don't have reliability data for all brands on the market.

One in four said they'd had their VCR repaired in the previous year, which is high compared with most other appliances. The average cost of repair was around \$100.

Percentage not needing repair

Sony (211)	85
Hitachi (53)	79
Akai (545)	78
JVC (264)	78
Mitsubishi (195)	78
Philips (274)	77
Sanyo (114)	77
AWA (73)	75
Samsung (116)	75
Sharp (501)	75
Teac (126)	75
Panasonic/National (1140)	73
Toshiba (63)	73
NEC (257)	69

Percentage who would buy the same brand again

Panasonic/National (1171)	93
Sony (211)	93
Mitsubishi (207)	91
Toshiba (66)	91
JVC (272)	89
Sanyo (119)	88
Sharp (517)	86
Philips (281)	84
AWA (75)	83
Akai (559)	80
Hitachi (55)	80
Teac (125)	77
NEC (256)	75
Samsung (121)	68

Are four heads better than two?

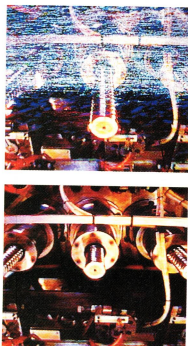
Just over half the VCRs we tested have four heads; the rest have two. Does the difference matter? It depends on how you use the VCR.

Regardless of how many heads a VCR has, it uses only two during ordinary playback and recording, so the quality of these functions won't improve with the addition of more heads.

However, the quality of the freeze-frame and slow-motion images produced by the VCR will be improved with four heads. For some consumers — sports fans, for example — this level of performance might justify looking specifically for a four-head VCR.

You don't actually have to pay more — number of heads isn't related to price.

The differences between two and four-head VCRs were clearly illustrated during our test. The two-head **Philips** models scored evenly throughout — until we paused the picture. The two-head **Philips VR357** (top) didn't produce as clear a still picture as the four-head **Philips VR457** (right). This is reflected in the slight difference between their final scores.



2	2	2	2	3	4	5	6	
VCR playback	Remote can operate TVs	Auto head clean	Switches to LP	Video score (%)	LP score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
✓		3		79	75	79	78	LG T493H
✓	✓	✓		83	65	77	78	PHILIPS VR457
✓				80	65	79	78	SAMSUNG SV-A90B
✓	✓	✓	✓	83	85	74	77	SHARP VC-A460X
✓				83	75	73	76	DAEWOO DV-F562P
✓		✓		78	75	75	76	NEC VNG-68
✓	✓	✓		80	0	81	76	PANASONIC NV-SD270A
✓		✓		75	65	77	76	PHILIPS VR357
✓		✓	✓	78	75	74	75	AKAI VS-G465EA
✓		✓		66	75	75	73	HITACHI VT-M528E
✓		✓		80	0	75	72	PANASONIC NV-SD220A
✓		✓	✓	76	75	69	71	AKAI VS-G460EA
✓	✓	✓	✓	84	85	66	71	SHARP VC-A410X
✓	✓	✓		79	0	72	69	SONY SLV-X327AZ

1 Video heads

See *Are four heads better than two?* left, for an explanation of the difference between VCRs with two and four heads.

2 Features

See *What to look for*, on page 44, for an explanation of all these features.

3 Video score

The video score was based on five assessments:

- Picture quality of a rental tape.
- Picture quality of a standard-play (SP) recording.
- Picture quality of a paused image.
- Picture quality of a recorded test pattern.
- Picture quality during fast forward and rewind search.

4 LP (long-play) score

The LP score was based on the picture quality of a recording made at LP speed. VCRs that could only record at SP speed were given a score of zero. To some people, LP may be

important enough that they'd only look at VCRs with this capability.

5 Ease of use score

This score included five elements:

- The remote control.
- Timer recording.
- Instructions.
- G-code recording.
- Setting the clock.

6 Overall score

The above three scores were weighted as follows to arrive at the overall score:

- Video score: 24%
- LP score: 6%
- Ease of use score: 70%

Ease of use — particularly timer recording — tends to be what sets VCRs apart from each other, which is why we weighted it so highly.

Live wire

A reminder: even when these VCRs switch off — and some do so automatically — they continue to draw an electric current. But staying on standby mode allows the clock and recording timer to function.

For people with disabilities

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre assessed the VCRs to determine which would be the easiest to use for people with a disability.

■ VCRs with clearly identified, large function buttons are preferable. Models with dial-type knobs for fast forward and rewind could be a problem for users with hand problems — they'd have to grip and turn the controls rather than just press a button.

■ Remote controls are important. They should be easy to grip, with clearly labelled and uncluttered function buttons.



A couple of remotes in our test have flip-top covers that conceal most of the programming buttons but leave the main functions — like stop, play, fast forward and rewind — easily accessible on a less crowded surface. However, these could be more difficult for a person with hand problems to use.



YOUR LETTERS

Better off without health insurance

I read with interest the letter from John Supple in the March 1997 edition. Having been in private health insurance since my first job in 1970, I opted out 10 years ago, along with my husband and three small children.

I had an asthmatic three-year-old and it was my experience with her being hospitalised twice that made my mind up. I found that by admitting to having private insurance (in a public hospital) we were actually penalised. We received accounts for the specialist, the pharmacy and even a bill of \$18 per night for the stretcher that my husband and I slept on to help with my daughter's care! After claiming through the health fund we were still out of pocket.

The next time my daughter was admitted to hospital my husband said we didn't have insurance (although at that time we still did) — the result was exactly the same care, even down to the same specialist, but not one bill! I then allowed the health

insurance to lapse. Years later, after three more admissions for asthma, three broken arms, an emergency appendix operation, a vasectomy and a cyst removal, I don't regret my decision one bit.

I know there may have been a different scenario had any of us had to have serious elective surgery, but by not paying health insurance premiums we are around \$20,000 better off. Until governments and health funds realise that people should not be penalised for being privately insured, we will continue to see an exodus to Medicare — and I fear the ultimate downfall of the system.

Glenda Parsonage
Rowville, Vic

November 1997 CHOICE explored the state of our healthcare system and outlined some of the problems with private health insurance.

CHOICE supports Medicare as a universal and publicly funded healthcare system for many reasons, including access to quality treatment based on need, not the ability to pay, and the fact that it makes

economic sense. However, we're also committed to working with government and industry to make private health insurance better value for money for those who choose to take it out.

Cot win

I am writing to advise that the Ministerial Council on Consumer Affairs (MCCA) has agreed that a mandatory safety standard for children's household cots supplied in Australia be introduced from June 30, 1998.

After considering reports on child injuries associated with the use of cots, MCCA agreed at its meeting on August 29, 1997, that there is a need to ensure that household cots in the market provide basic levels of safety. To achieve this, a national mandatory consumer product safety standard for household cots will be declared under the Trade Practices Act, to take effect from June 30, 1998. From that date suppliers of household cots will be required to ensure that the goods comply with the mandatory standard. Parallel mandatory requirements will also be introduced under state and territory fair trading legislation.

The mandatory safety requirements for cots will adopt the relevant safety provisions of the Australian/New Zealand Standard AS/NZS 2172-1995, *Cots for household use — Safety requirements*.

While the mandatory safety requirements do not come into force until June 30, 1998, suppliers are encouraged to implement the existing voluntary standard immedi-



Finally there will be a mandatory safety standard for cots — something CHOICE has been fighting for years.

ately, as set out in AS/NZS 2172-1995.

Ministers also decided that there is a need to ensure that information is available to parents and carers on the safe use of cots, and a communications strategy is being developed to provide this information.

Trevor Rodgers
Consumer Affairs, DIST,
Canberra, ACT

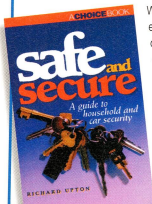
We're delighted there will finally be a mandatory safety standard for cots, which we've been lobbying for for many years. However, note that this ruling doesn't apply to folding portable cots, carrycots or cradles.

Childbirth choices

I read with interest your article on childbirth choices in the August 1997 issue. Sometimes it is very difficult to get the care you want even if that type of care is provided in your area.

During my third pregnancy, with a history of two emergency caesarean sections behind me, all I wanted was a

LETTER OF THE MONTH



We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. To thank you for writing to us, Your Letters awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Glenda Parsonage of Rowville, Vic, receives *Safe and Secure*, which explains how to make your home, your car and yourself safer, with practical tips on improving your security cheaply and effectively.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.

doctor to support me in my desire for a normal birth. Almost every doctor I spoke to would only consider accepting me as a client if I agreed to an elective caesarean section.

I researched the topic and found that it was safer for my baby, and safer for me, to plan a normal birth and therefore I refused to have an unnecessary elective caesarean. I eventually found a supportive specialist and went on to give birth to my daughter without the need for a caesarean.

I am part of a community-based support network called BACUP (Birth After Caesarean — Unlimited Possibilities). Through my contact with BACUP, I am aware that there are women all over Australia who have had one or more caesarean sections and who have difficulties in finding a care giver who will support them in the particular childbirth choices that they make during a subsequent pregnancy.

Why is it that while a large number of studies have shown the safety of a VBAC (vaginal birth after caesarean), many doctors still choose to advise women against this option? Unnecessary elective caesareans are an expense (in every sense) that women, and Australians generally, cannot afford.

I hope that your article will give more women the confidence and information they need to demand the care that they want.

**Kathleen Oldman
Denman, NSW**

Kathleen tells us that BACUP has members throughout Australia. Phone (02) 6547 2142 to find a contact closest to you. Be aware, however, that there will be some instances in which a VBAC will not be possible.

If you find a recall or ban not on our list, please let us know. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after the recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

THE PRODUCT: Woolworths has recalled **Home Brand Refrigerated Stir Fry Noodles**, 500 g, APN 9300633932022, sold by Woolworths Supermarkets in NSW, ACT and Queensland, and Philip Leong stores and Food for Less food stores in Queensland, between October 7 and November 13, 1997.

The problem: Tests have indicated the presence of bacterial organisms above acceptable levels.

What to do: Stop eating this product immediately. If you have concerns after consuming it, contact your doctor. Return it to your nearest store for a full cash refund. For more information contact Customer Information: 1800 801 393.

THE PRODUCT: Target has recalled **Itsy Bitsy Bean Bag Friends**, sold by Target and Baby Target stores since September 8, 1997.

The problem: When the swing tag is removed, it can cause a hole through which the small beans used as stuffing can leak, creating a potential ingestion or inhalation hazard for young children.

What to do: Return the product to your nearest Target or Baby Target store immediately for a full refund. For more information contact Customer Inquiries: 1800 814 788.

THE PRODUCT: Sandra Powell & Associates has recalled the following **Et Vous sunglasses**, distributed between August 15 and November 6, 1997:

The problem:

■ Models 010, 011, 015, 018, 023, 031, 036 are not suitable for people with defective colour vision.

■ Model 051 should have been marked "specific purpose sunglasses Type (b) for protection against ultraviolet radiation in sunlight for specified environments", with the warning "not suitable for driving".

■ Models 038, 039, 040 have lenses which are too small and restrict the field of vision.

■ Models 025, 026, 027, 032, 033, 034, 046, 047, 048, 049, 050, 055, 056, 057 may cause blurred vision, misjudgment of depth and/or misjudgment of position.

■ Models 033, 042 may cause misjudgment of the distance of moving objects, causing a hazard.

What to do: Stop wearing these sunglasses and return them to the place of purchase for a full refund.

THE PRODUCT: The Reject Shop has recalled the **Exercise Air Bike**, with barcode no. 21557743, bought from The Reject Shop between October 1 and October 20, 1997.

The problem: The bike does not comply with the relevant mandatory product safety standard; the guard around the flywheel and flywheel loading mechanism is not adequate to prevent injury from hazardous moving parts; there were no user instructions provided as required.

What to do: Don't use the bike; store it out of reach of children. Return it to the nearest Reject Shop for a full refund. For more information contact Chris Hayes: (03) 9371 5555.

THE PRODUCT: Big W has recalled **Christmas Lights 140 pce** (barcode 941322328512 or 9314223359120), **60 pce** (barcode 9314223063355 or 9314223062983), and **Star Tree-top Lights 15 pce** (barcode 9314223003443), purchased between October 1995 and November 5, 1997 from Big W stores in all mainland states and territories. All sets also have the following approval number on the moulded plastic plug: North West NW-06 N13677.

The problem: They can be unsafe when in use, as tinsel or other tree decorations may contact live parts within the lamp holders, potentially causing an electric shock hazard.

What to do: Don't use them. Return them to the nearest Big W store for a full refund. For more information call Customer Information: 1800 633 505.

THE PRODUCT: GE Lighting has recalled **candle and fancy round globes**, manufactured in Indonesia and sold under different brand names between September 1996 and October 28, 1997. They can be recognised by the GE logo and the word **Indonesia** on the globe.

The problem: They can be unsafe if used in unearthen metal lamps or fittings produced before 1976.

What to do: Return the item to the place of purchase for a full refund. Ensure that the lamp and power are turned off before removing the globe. For more information, call 1800 812 852.

THE PRODUCT: Ansell has recalled three types of condom with a use-by date of May 1999 or earlier, and all in packs of 12.

■ **Ultrasure Extra Strength Condoms with Nonoxynol 9.**

■ **Lifestyles Ultrasure Condoms with Nonoxynol 9.**
■ **Affinity Extra Strength Condoms with Nonoxynol 9.**

The problem: The product may fail to meet the required standard for the duration of the stated shelf-life.

What to do: Don't use the condoms. For more information contact 1800 628 862.

THE PRODUCT: Digital Equipment Corporation (Aust) has recalled its **AC Adaptor, PH-30-47941-01**, supplied on its own or with Digital's VP510 Series notebook computer.

The problem: When the mains power cord is pulled out of the AC adaptor, it can drag with it a connector pin that could be live at mains voltage of 240 V. Touching this exposed end could be fatal.

What to do: Don't remove the AC power cord from the AC adaptor without first switching off the mains power and removing the AC power cord from the mains-power wall socket. Digital will supply a replacement adaptor as stocks become available. For further information, call 13 23 93.

THE PRODUCT: Edge Computer (Melbourne) has recalled **KTX Topscan 15" monitor, model CAE 364 SG**, sold in Victoria and SA between July 1995 and June 1996. The model number and manufacture date are on the back of the monitor.

The problem: The transformer may short circuit.

What to do: Turn the monitor off immediately, unplug it from the mains and return it to Edge Computer for modification at no cost. For further information contact Edge Computer on (03) 9416 0099 or (03) 9755 5755.

Correction

In December 1997 we reported the recall by 3M Pharmaceuticals of dose **Medihaler-epi 400 dose pressurised inhaler**. The model number quoted was Aust R54136.

This number should be **Aust R54163**. It was printed incorrectly in the recall notice we received, and 3M has since alerted us to the mistake.

INSIDE story



Users roadtesting pramettes.

LAB TESTS CAN'T TELL THE FULL story about all products. We can measure how much dirt a washing machine removes from clothes, for example, but not which suitcase will be easiest to wheel, which day backpack is the most comfortable to carry, which iron is the best to use, and so on.

Often we're looking at a product where the experience of using it in real life is an important part of assessing whether it's worth buying. That's where our user trials come in. Our Consumer Research department organises a panel of people to use it for a period of time under conditions that simulate its everyday use.

So, for example, a group of parents will bring their toddlers in and wheel them along footpaths and up and down hills and kerbs so that we can find out which stroller most people prefer and why.

Or a group of experienced bushwalkers will take a set of day backpacks into the bush to see which ones are the most comfortable to wear and convenient to use.

Often we recruit subscribers for these trials — at the moment, for example, you might have been asked to take part in a trial of mould removers and window cleaners we'll be reporting on later this year.

We appreciate the hard work subscribers put into these trials, and thank all those who've ever taken part in one. It's one way your experiences can help CHOICE advise other consumers how to buy wisely.

ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance the quality of life for consumers. It is a Council member of Consumers International.

We are completely independent. We buy all the products we test on the open market. We are not beholden to any commercial, government or union interests, and we don't accept advertising, paid or unpaid. Our income is derived from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and products.

We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a **Best Buy**. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. We can't conduct special tests or provide information about tested products beyond what appears in CHOICE. Financial information in CHOICE is of a general nature, and is not intended to be advice on individual investments which should or should not be made.

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COMPUTER CHOICE (published bi-monthly) provides information and tests for home computer users.

CONSUMING INTEREST, our quarterly policy and campaigning magazine, provides reports, analysis, opinion and debates on consumer issues. It also gives updates on the lobbying and campaign projects of the Consumers' Association.

CHOICE Health Reader (published 10 times per year) gives you the latest findings on nutrition, exercise and all branches of medicine and health care, compiled from up to 200 international scientific journals.

CHOICE Travel is produced by the UK Consumers' Association and reprinted by CHOICE four times a year. Its reports are independent in the same style as CHOICE and, while they're written from the perspective of a European base, most of the information in them is just as useful to travelling Australians.

CHOICEFax supplies faxed copies of many CHOICE and Computer CHOICE articles for \$6 per article to subscribers, \$16 to non-subscribers. Call (02) 9577 3277 to order by credit card.

CHOICEMONEYLINE gives accurate and independent credit information by phone. It provides up-to-date details about the most competitive home loans, personal loans, overdrafts and credit cards from banking institutions in your area. The information can also be faxed. Call 1900 17 00 88. (Calls cost \$1.95 per minute. Mobile phones have higher rates.

Data from Cannex; phone service from Broadsystem).

Test Research provides fee-for-service testing and research on consumer products, services and regulatory issues for other consumer organisations, government and industry. **Manager:** Raja Rajagopal. **Contact:** Jeanette Dwyer on (02) 9577 3333.

Twelve-month INDEX

March 1997 — January/February 1998

How to use this index

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.
* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items or letters.

For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts, many other small pieces, and Recalls and Bans.

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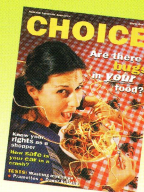
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Looking for an article?

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on page 42.





YOU WERE ASKING

Interested in your interest?

Fifteen-year-old Chris Pogson from Orange in NSW had saved \$1200 in his Commonwealth Bank transaction account. However, when he discovered he was only earning 0.25% interest, he went in search of a better deal.

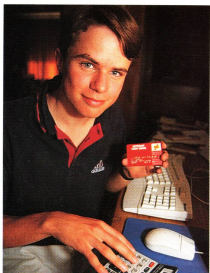


PHOTO BY STEVE GOSCH

WHEN HE WAS CLOSING his account at the Commonwealth, Chris was told about a range of accounts with higher interest rates. But he felt it was too little too late. "I didn't want to be with a bank that was content to pay me 0.25%, rather than tell me about accounts where I could earn more," he says.

By shopping around, Chris discovered he could get a better deal at his local credit union. It suggested he put his money in a transaction account (earning 0.5%), a term deposit (3.75%) and a 'super saver' account (3.5%).

We asked the four big banks whether they inform customers about interest rate options. ANZ and NAB both said they discuss the variety of interest rates and fees available to new customers when opening an account. At the Commonwealth and Westpac, it's up to the customer to find out what's available from the bank's advertising. But none of the banks said they'd regularly update customers about their account options.

If, like Chris, you're not happy with what you're earning, it may be time to think about moving your money. It can be as simple as earning a higher interest rate from a different account at your existing institution. Or, if you're with a bank, you might want to consider a credit union or building society instead.

We found that for a balance of \$5000, nine of the 10 highest-paying personal transaction accounts were with credit unions or building societies. □

What's on offer from the Big Four?

Bank / account name	Interest rate (%)*	Minimum balance (\$)	Cheque	Credit card	ATM/ EFTPOS	Pass-book
ANZ						
Access Flexible / Value	0.10 to 0.25	No	✓	✓	✓	
Cash Management	0.25 to 1.25	2000				
High Performance Passbook	0.10 to 0.50	No				✓
Progress Saver (A)	0.75 to 2.00	500			✓	
Term Deposit (B)	0.25 to 5.60	1000				
COMMONWEALTH						
Award Saver (C)	0.10 to 0.50	No		✓	✓	
CABI	0.10 to 0.65	No	✓	✓	✓	
Cash Management	1.00 to 1.50	5000	✓	✓	✓	
Savings Investment	0.10 to 0.50	No				✓
Streamline / Streamline Express	0.10 to 0.25	No	✓ (D)	✓	✓	
Term Deposit (B)	0.25 to 5.35	1000				
NATIONAL AUSTRALIA						
Cash Management	1.00 to 1.50	5000			✓	
Flexi / Flexi Direct	0.10 to 0.20	No	✓		✓	
Term Deposit (B)	0.25 to 5.50	1000				
WESTPAC						
Bonus Saver Account (C)	0.25 to 0.75	No		✓	✓	
Cash Management	0.10 to 1.50	No	✓	✓	✓	
Classic / Classic Plus	0.10 to 0.25	No	✓	✓	✓	
Ordinary Saver	0.10 to 0.25	No	✓	✓	✓	
Passbook Saver monthly	0.10 to 0.40	No				✓
Passbook Saver semi-annual	0.10 to 0.50	No				✓
Premium Saver	0.15 to 2.00	No				✓
Term Deposit (B)	0.75 to 5.95	500				

How hard is your money working?

This year Australians will miss out on an estimated \$4 billion in interest by leaving their savings stuck in a basic transaction account. In May 1997 we looked at alternatives which will still allow access to your money if you need it:

- Cash management trusts pool your money with that of other investors and invest it in the money market.
- Savings investment bonus accounts give you a bonus (extra interest) if you make no withdrawals in a month.
- If you have a mortgage, consider a mortgage offset account or a 'redraw' facility.
- For pensioners, deeming accounts can offer higher rates.

For more details, see our article *Getting out of the transaction trap*, CHOICE, May 1997.

* Interest rate range based on a balance of up to \$10,000. Interest may be higher for a larger amount.

(A) Your interest doubles if you make one deposit and no withdrawals in a month.

(B) Interest rate depends on amount invested and investment period.

(C) Bonus interest of 3% if one deposit and no withdrawals in a month.

(D) Streamline account only.

Information correct at October 28, 1997.